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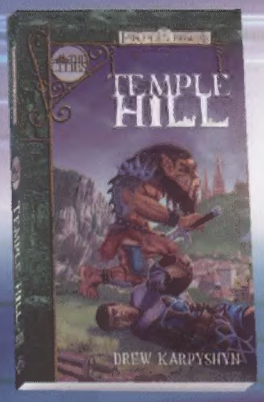


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# contents

*RIGHT: Detail of* The Fiend in You *by Richard Powers, who is the subject of this issue's Gallery.*

*COVER: By John Monteleone.*

## departments


**6** EDITORIAL

**8** LETTERS

**12** TELEVISION
*By Resa Nelson*
Fall 2001: Mutants, shapeshifters, and monsters are unmasked.

**20** FOLKROOTS
*By Gregory Frost*
The French salons gave birth to both fairy tales and animal magnetism.

**30** BOOKS
*By Gahan Wilson and Paul Di Filippo*
Take a new look at Oz through the eyes of the Wicked Witch of the West.

**68** GALLERY
*By Jane Frank*
Richard Powers is the master of surreal dreams.

**90** GAMES
*By Eric T. Baker*
It's Bullet Time! *Max Payne* treats players to a virtual killing spree.

**98** CONTRIBUTORS


## fiction


**44** IF ON A MOONLIT NIGHT
*By M. Shayne Bell*
Is vengeance a dish best served cold, or warm ... like blood?

**50** AS SWEET
*By Daniel Abraham*
The course of true love never runs smoothly. It's not supposed to.

**58** THE INNOCENT AND THE PIPER
*By Eric T. Baker*
Innocence can be found in the most unlikely places—even in the souls of the damned.

**64** QUEEN
*By Gene Wolfe*
When you read a Gene Wolfe story, you may like some of it, and not like other parts of it. But your faith will always be rewarded.

**74** A RESPECTFUL SILENCE
*By Richard Parks*
When you love someone they can never die. That's not always a good thing.

**80** ARTIE'S ANGELS
*By Catherine Wells*
Every generation gets the hero they truly need.

**86** LAST TOUR OF DUTY
*By Devon Monk*
If you take your luck where you find it, maybe when you need it, it will find you.


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# How to be a Writer or My Visit to Clarion

You've all read the letters that we run sometimes. They say, "Dear Ms. McCarthy, I'm a big fan of your magazine, and I've been reading fantasy since I was six years old. I'm in (seventh grade, high school, college, graduate school, the army, a permanent vegetative state, love, prison) now, and I'd like to try writing myself. Can you tell me how to get started?"

I always reply with a cheery, "Just send a self-addressed stamped envelope to P.O Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760 for our editorial requirements, and all will be explained therein." While that's not exactly a *lie*, it's certainly not what the letter writers want to hear either, and I know it very well. What the letter writers want is The Secret. Every Would-be writer feels that there must be just one thing, one little secret that everyone else knows but them, one trick of the trade that, once you know it, is perfectly obvious, which will let them break through the wall of rejection slips and finally become a published writer.

Well, I've spent many years denying the existence of that secret, because in truth, I never really believed there was one. I thought it was talent, or the lack thereof, that determined whether or not a Would-be writer turned into an Is. Since my return from this year's Clarion (what's Clarion? more on that later), however, I've realized that that's not entirely true. There is, in fact, a Secret, one which the battered students at Clarion find out in the first week, one which, in the best traditions of fantasy, I will reveal to you with the warning that knowing it won't do you any good at all. Here it is: Writing is not as easy as it looks. In fact, it's not easy at all. In fact, it's really freakin' hard work. Digging ditches pays better and is much easier. I'm not (as Dave Barry would say) making this up.

So the biggest difference between a Would-be writer and an Is is this: A Would-be writer thinks that all you need is a word processor, the desire, and maybe an idea. The Would-be writer thinks that you sit at your keyboard and let the Muse sweep over you, filling your fingers with creativity and your blank paper with deathless prose, that you "start at the beginning and keep going till the end." The Is writer laughs bitterly at such a concept. A short story is filled with mechanics that, if the story is well written, are utterly hidden to the casual reader. Exposition, character, back story, theme, plot, unreliable narrators, first person, third person, omniscient narrators, passive voice, active voice, flashback, flash-forward: These are the nuts and bolts of story writing that the Would-be writer probably hasn't even heard of, or if he or she has, can't control any better than I could control a Boeing 747. It takes practice, training, and long hard years before these skills penetrate and take root, and even then it's never a matter of sitting at your keyboard and letting the Muse sweep over you. Stories by professional writers are roundly workshopped, critiqued, revised, and rewritten before they're ever shipped out to an editor. And guess what? Even then a lot of them are rejected.

So what's Clarion, and how will it help you become a published writer? Well, Clarion is the single most successful science fiction (and fantasy) writing workshop in the country—maybe even the world. It's been around for nearly 30 years now and has trained many, if not most, of the writers you read regularly. It's an intensive six-week program that runs during the summer on both the West Coast and in the Midwest, though the one in the Midwest is confusingly called Clarion East. Over the six-week period there are six professional writers in residence and one professional editor to help students learn the mechanics of story writing. Students generally write at least a story a week, and most of them write far more. Each story is workshopped and critiqued by every student and the instructor, and students are advised to bring their sturdiest ego armor, as these sessions could not easily be described as love-fests.

Is it painful? Jeez, yeah. Is it difficult? After seeing the shambling students some five weeks into the process, I'd have to say that assembling a nuclear reactor in your basement with tools from your junk drawer is probably simpler. Is it effective? Just ask Ed Bryant, Octavia Butler, George Alec Effinger, James Patrick Kelly, Vonda McIntyre, Kim Stanley Robinson, Martha Soukup, and Bruce Sterling among scores of other successful graduates. So if you're really serious about becoming an Is instead of a Would-be, check out www.msu.edu/~clarion/workshop/workshopinfo.html for more information. Good luck!

*Shawna McCarthy*

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VOLUME 8 NUMBER 2

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Dear *Realms of Fantasy,*

I've just finished the August 2001 issue, and I have to take a step back and breathe deeply. While I especially enjoyed the fiction by David Lee Summers (a great, great nod to *Moby Dick*) and Lois Tilton, the standout for me was Harlan Ellison's "Incognita, Inc." I love Ellison's optimism; there is always something fantastic hidden in this mundane world of ours. And I also love his determination that the "efficiency" of the modern world and our fascination with everything on a modem or a satellite is taking that wonder away from us. As Drummond said in *Inherit the Wind,* "You can have the telephone, but you lose the charm of distance." The narrator in Ellison's story could almost have been the same man from "Jefty Is Five," trying to preserve the wonder and innocence of youth, only to lose it to modern life. I was moved to tears, but I thank you for that experience.

Cordially,
Aaron R. Davis

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

I have the utmost respect for Terri Windling, her articles, and her learning portrayed within. Indeed, I know her no other way than through her articles. These articles may or may not be an accurate portrait of her.

In her Folkroots column of the April 2001 issue, Windling writes that "Lewis Carroll may or may not have been a closet pedophile." Isn't this silly? It's like saying (granted, much less insidiously), "Carroll may or may not have been fond of carrots," or "Carroll may or may not have collected rabbits." It's saying nothing.

The travesty is compounded by the use of the word "closet." What I understand by the modern use of the word "closet" is that something has been hidden away—usually a sexual aberrancy. In effect, a person may be something, but there is no external evidence for it. Thus, these days we get to say, "He isn't homosexual, but he really is." What does that mean?

But I suppose it's the sort of thing that interests us these days. That is why we "learn" that Emily Dickinson may or may not have been a lesbian, and that C.S. Lewis may or may not have been gay, and *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* may or may not have been written by his sister. The reason why educators get away with this sort of thing is because there is no evidence for it. It's all conjectural (and said personages are safely dead). To illustrate this kind of logic, C.S. Lewis himself once wrote something like "If there was an invisible cat in that chair, the chair would appear empty. But the chair does appear empty. Therefore, there is an invisible cat in that chair."

I likewise find fault with the passage Windling quoted from *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women:* "Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, and J.M. Barrie envied the children they could not be; out of this envy came their painful children's classics." Are you serious? Of course, having not read the book myself, Auerbach and Knoepflmacher may have provided sufficient evidence to support this "insightful" statement, but I doubt it. Mercifully, they go on to write, "Most Victorian women envied adults rather than children." Thank you, writers, for that leniency.

As a last note, *Realms of Fantasy* staff—I like the new fonts. And I enjoyed the stories "Sop Doll" and "The Premature Burials."

Thank you,
G.N. Dybing
Lanesboro, Minnesota

Dear Resa Nelson,

What an interesting article on the "pairing" of Edgar Allan Poe and Vincent Price. I remember vividly the rainy Sunday afternoons spent watching many of the mentioned chilling tales of horror. Somehow, modern horror films never measured up after that …

Kendra Lowell
N. Attleboro, Massachusetts

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

I'm quite amused to note that the April 2001 issue of *Realms* (the one with the letter about missing protective covers) arrived today without a protective cover. I myself don't mind the glitch, but I thought I'd let you know it's not at all a transient one, apparently.

I suspect, by the way, that your torn-up-cover gremlin is yet another subscriber irritated by the cheesecake aspects of some of your cover art. While your covers may not be to my taste either, I don't really mind as long as the stories inside stay stellar. But enough about covers! I look forward to spending the afternoon curled up on the couch with the cats, reading the latest issue.

Best,
Lori Selke

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

Suddenly realized after perusing the last issue of *Realms* and "The Books to Watch For" section (*Redgunk Tales,* by William R. Eakin) that I haven't seen his stories in your magazine for quite some time. Any new stories on the way? I always enjoyed his fiction immensely and I'm looking forward to getting the *Redgunk Tales* collection. Please publish him again.

Thank you,
David Jaffa
Hoboken, New Jersey

*Are you listening Bill?*

Dear *ROF,*

"Big City Littles" by Charles de Lint (October 2001) was a charming story and exactly the type of thing I like to read when I pick up your magazine. More of this in future issues please! Also enjoyed "Patterns" by Mary Soon Lee. And while my husband snapped up the magazine when he saw your cover, I found that aspect of your magazine a little much. I realize teenage boys read it—but what about teenage girls? This woman looks like a *Playboy* magazine centerfold, doesn't she? Not quite in sync with the stories inside. Oh well, I am looking forward to future issues and especially your diverse and well-written fiction. There is certainly no other magazine out there today that compares with *Realms.*

Sincerely,
Kim Rossano

Dear *Realms,*

Great magazine as always. However, when reading through it I noticed a few mistakes in respect of dating. In the article, "The Mists of Avalon Comes to Life," it is stated that Angelica Huston lived in 10th-century Norman castles (page 14). A bit of an impossibility I would have thought as the Normans did not invade England until 1066 and did not come to Ireland until 1169. So the earliest Norman castles in Ireland date from the late 12th century at the earliest and most of these are little more than mounds of earth now.

In the article entitled "Camelot Revisited" it gives the date that Victoria ascended the throne as 1831 (page 72). In reality she did not ascend the throne until 1837 on the death of her uncle William IV and wasn't crowned until 1838.

Michael O'Donovan
Suffolk
United Kingdom

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*Your letters are welcome. Send them to: Letters to the Editor,* Realms of Fantasy, *P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, E-mail to: shawnam896@aol.com*

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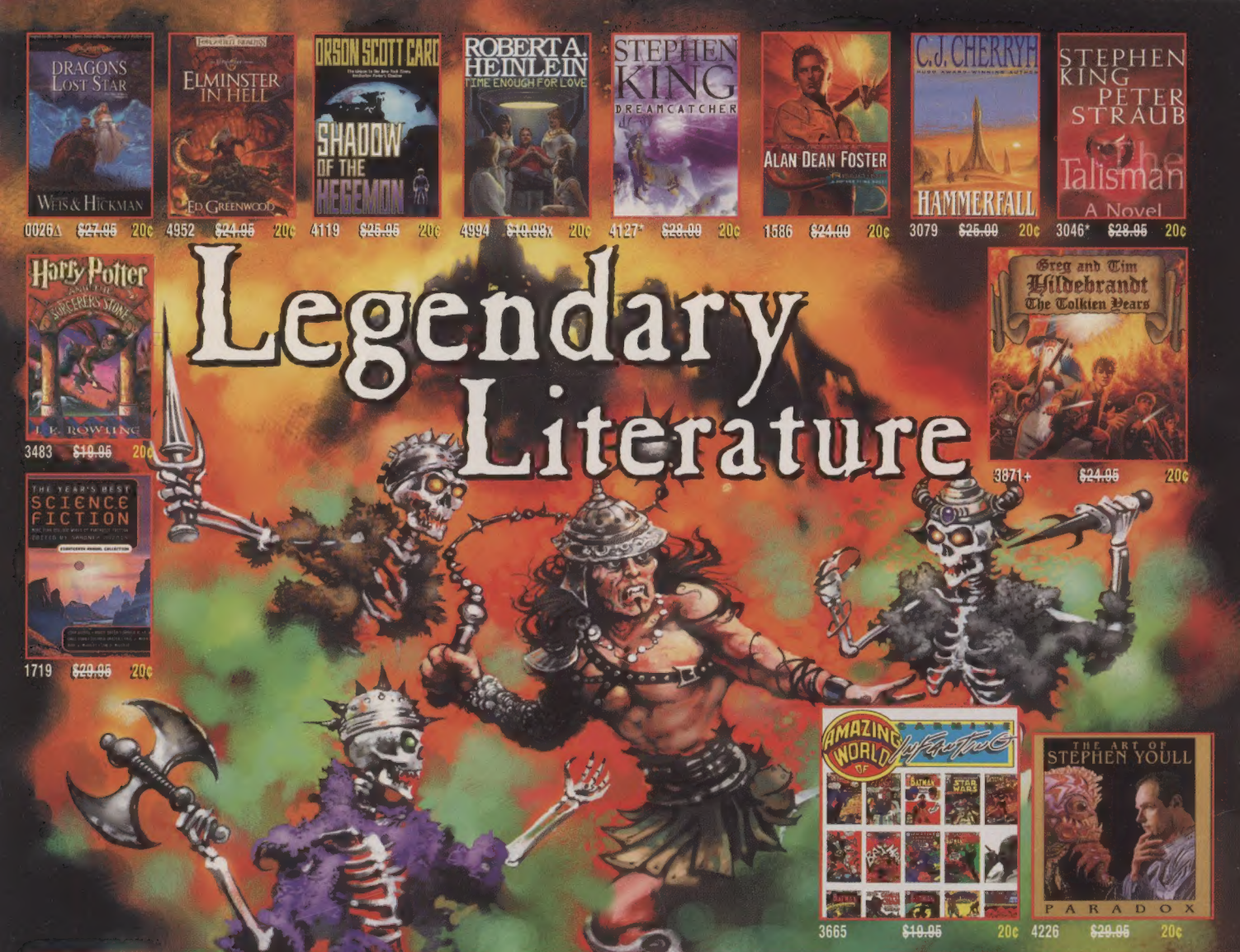


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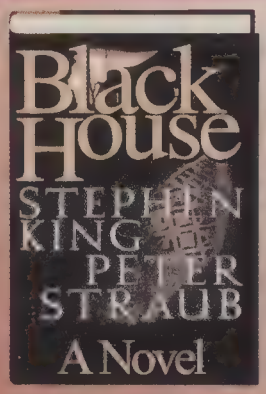


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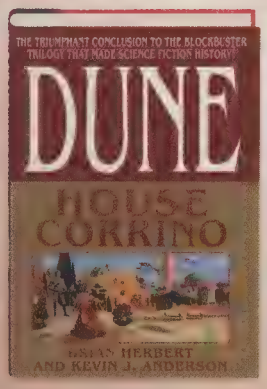
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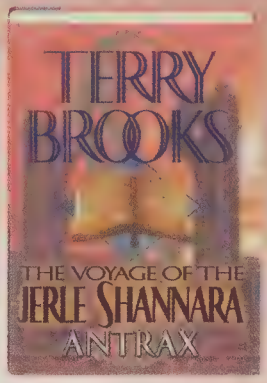


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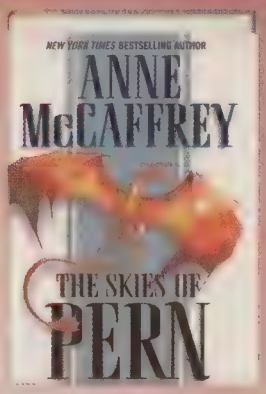


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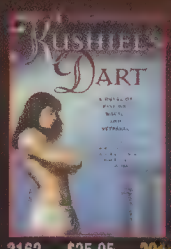


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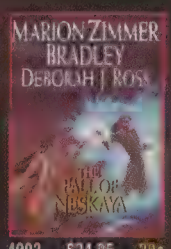


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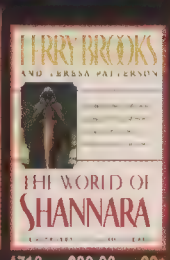


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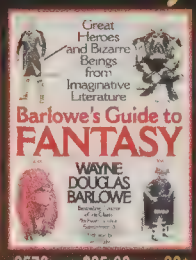


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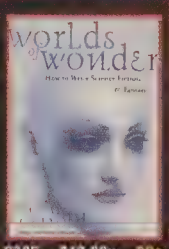


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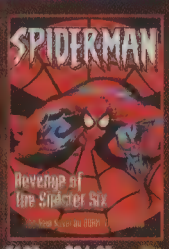


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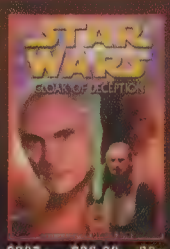


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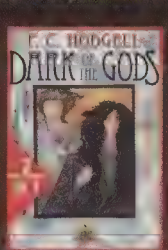


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SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB®
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By Resa Nelson

# Fall 2001: Mutants, shapeshifters, and monsters are unmasked.

The new fantasy shows on television this season tend to fall into one of two categories. You can expect to see either a lot of strange creatures or a lot of normal-looking people who have a secret.

The most exciting new series to premiere in syndication is *Mutant X*, which has a two-year commitment to air, a sure sign of faith. Don't make the mistake of confusing *Mutant X* with the *X-Men* franchise—although there's a similarity between the two, they have nothing to do with each other. *Mutant X* is a series with its own unique voice and vision.

Here's the premise: *Mutant X* takes place in the very near future. A secret branch of the U.S. government has been doing human genetics research for the past several years. The problem is that the test subjects—a few hundred men and women—had no idea that they were being used as Guinea pigs. Without their knowledge or consent, these unknowing and unwilling test subjects mutate and develop unusual abilities. They're referred to as the "Children of Genomex," a biotech company that acts as a front for the Genetic Security Agency. As the powers of the Children of Genomex surface, they find themselves caught between the Genetic Security Agency and Mutant X, which is a small group of powerful mutants led by multi-millionaire Adam (played by John Shea of *Missing* and TV's *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*), the former chief biogeneticist at Genomex.

*Shalimar Fox (Victoria Pratt) walks the line between human and feral in the fantasy series* Mutant X. *The complete cast is shown in the inset.*

Executive consultant and head writer Howard Chaykin (TV's *Earth: Final Conflict*) talks about his vision for *Mutant X*. "I come from comics and television. I tend to be associated with this sort of material, but in reality I actually did very little of this stuff in my comics career. I did a lot of crime or post-holocaust negative utopia or weird fantasy. My primary model for this sort of material is *Mission: Impossible* and *The A Team*—an adventure franchise in which, instead of guns, ammo, and high tech, our heroes are equipped with a special gift. And we are not doing costumed characters, or guys running around in masks and capes.

"We're scrupulously staying away from comic book references or campy material. Our work has conviction in a world that exists sometime late tomorrow morning. There's obviously a tweak in technology, reflected in our characters and their world. Things are just slightly off—so we know we're a couple of days in the future."

A very strong aspect of the series is that its characters walk a fine line between doing the right thing and misusing their powers. The heroes sometimes struggle with the temptation to control other people in the same spirit that the government controlled them. One member of Mutant X is Emma deLauro (played by Lauren Lee Smith of TV's *Christy*). Emma is a "telempath," which means that she can trans-

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*Officer Nick O'Malley (Michael Landes) goes head to head with a living gargoyle in a first-season episode of* Special Unit 2.

mit and receive feelings telepathically. She has the power to influence and control the behavior of people around her.

"I set out to find a way for these characters' enhanced abilities to affect their real lives," Chaykin says. "In our opening two-parter, Emma blurts out that yesterday she was a salesgirl, and now she's sucked into somebody else's paranoid fantasy. And we learn that while she was a salesgirl, she used her abilities to support a career."

Since acquiring *Wolf Lake* last spring, CBS has retooled the series to strengthen the story line and the characters. *Wolf Lake* is a supernatural drama about a small town in the Pacific Northwest with a secret to which most people in town are completely oblivious. About 20 percent of the townspeople have the ability to shapeshift into wolves.

According to Executive Producer Alex Gansa, the shapeshifters belong to an ancient tribe of wolves that has been around since the days of ancient Egypt. Given the power to walk on two feet by the gods, the clan has been persecuted for thousands of years. They founded the town in the 1800s and now occupy all positions of power. The humans who share the town are second-class citizens. Although the humans are suspicious, they have no idea that they're living among shapeshifters.

"We've decided to explode the regular myth," Gansa says. "There's no full moon. There's no silver bullet. There's no biting anybody and they become a wolf. It's merely a matter of genes. It's passed down through the blood."

Lou Diamond Phillips (*Courage Under Fire, Stand and Deliver*) plays John Kanin, a law enforcement officer who comes from Seattle to Wolf Lake in search of the woman he loves after she disappears. Kanin's very presence poses a threat to the community of wolves.

"The closer he gets to the truth," Gansa says, "the more he endangers the pack and endangers revealing their secret. They have to figure out what to do with him. The alpha male knows that his daughter is completely in love with Lou, so he can't just kill him. So you have this inherent sort of inverted beauty and the beast story."

Gansa, who worked on *The X-Files* as supervising producer during its first two seasons, reports that *Wolf Lake* will be sexy, horrific, a bit humorous, and "unapologetically" violent.

Or, as Phillips quips, "It's *The Sopranos* with fangs." But, unlike the Sopranos, the shapeshifters aren't cold-blooded killers.

"The wolves in the show are the heroes," Gansa says. "They're the persecuted ones. And so whatever they have to do to survive is somehow excused."

Then how do the humans in *Wolf Lake* fit into the picture?

"The humans aren't the villains," Gansa says. "There are no villains and there's no good guys. It's the complicated politics of a small town."

The WB offers up a new take on the Superman franchise with *Smallville*, a series that focuses on the early years of Clark Kent (played by Tom Welling of TV's *Judging Amy*) in his Kansas hometown. As in *Mutant X*, there are no masks or costumes—just a teenage boy with unusual powers that he's trying to keep under wraps.

*Smallville* combines the realism and tone of teen dramas like *Felicity* and *Dawson's Creek* with an action/adventure series. The pilot episode (directed by David Nutter of *The X-Files* and *Roswell*) shows how Clark literally lands in Smallville, Kansas. A billboard on the town limits advertises Smallville as the Creamed Corn Capital of the World. Jonathan and Martha Kent (played by John Schneider

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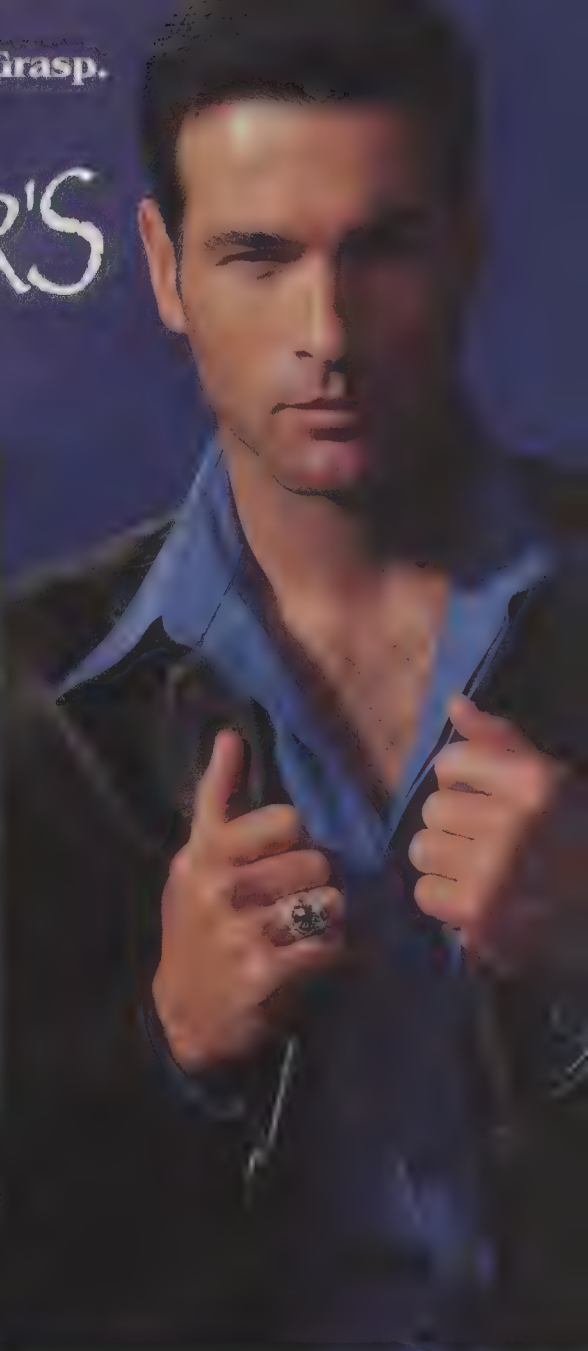

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*The cast of* Buffy the Vampire Slayer *looks forward to a new season on UPN. Fans of the show are waiting to discover how Buffy comes back from her death at the end of last season.*

of TV's *The Dukes of Hazzard* and Annette O'Toole, who played Lana Lang in *Superman III*) are a young couple longing but unable to have a child. A young boy named Lex Luthor is out in a cornfield while his wealthy father conducts business nearby with the locals. A little girl named Lana Lang plays in the care of her aunt.

And then a meteor shower crashes into town. The billboard is obliterated. Lex narrowly escapes death and Lana watches in horror as a meteor kills her parents. And Jonathan and Martha Kent are driving in their pickup truck when the onslaught flips it upside down. A little boy approaches from a spaceship that has crash-landed with the meteors.

Fast forward 12 years. There's a new billboard on the outskirts of Smallville that proclaims it to be the Meteor Capital of the World. The little alien boy is Clark Kent, who's nervously beginning his high school career. Lana Lang has grown up to be his beautiful next door neighbor. When the Kents finally reveal the truth about who and what he is, Clark is devastated to realize that the meteor shower that brought him to Earth actually killed Lana's

# A Talk with Daniel Radcliffe, a k a Harry Potter

As everyone knows, Harry Potter is the central character in a series of books for children and adults alike that has swept the world. Written by British author J.K. Rowling, the books follow the exploits of a boy who learns on his 11th birthday that he is the orphaned son of two powerful wizards and possesses unique magical powers of his own. This revelation astounds Harry, who has resigned himself to life with his vile Aunt Petunia (played by Fiona Shaw) and Uncle Vernon (Richard Griffiths). Aided by the amiable giant Hagrid (Robbie Coltrane), Harry is summoned from his life as an unwanted child to become a student at Hogwarts, a boarding school for wizards. Here, he meets his amazing new teachers—the all-knowing Professor Dumbledore (Richard Harris) and his loyal deputy, Professor McGonagall (Dame Maggie Smith); Professor of the Dark Arts Quirrell (Ian Hart), and the venomous Potions Master Professor Snape (Alan Rickman). But it isn't just his new tutors who play such an important role in Harry's life, but also a close circle of friends that becomes his new family. Ultimately, with their help, he takes on the powerful figure who was responsible for his parents' death.

Now, the first in the series—*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*—has been made into a movie. Directed by Chris Columbus (*Mrs. Doubtfire, Home Alone, Stepmom*), the film was produced by David Heyman and stars 11-year-old Daniel Radcliffe (*The Tailor of Panama,* BBC TV's *David Copperfield*) in the title role, with newcomers Emma Watson and Rupert Grint as Harry's friends, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. Here is an exclusive interview with Daniel Radcliffe:

**Q:** Could you say something about the process of auditioning? You've obviously been in productions before.

**Daniel:** My family was at the theater and David Heyman (the producer), who was in the row in front, kept turning round to look at me, and in the interval he came over to talk to my dad—I didn't know who he was. On the [following] Monday he asked to meet me and shortly after that we did a screen test.

**Daniel's mum:** I should make it clear that Chris Columbus had seen Daniel before [in other productions] and David has worked with Dan's dad.

**Q:** In *Harry Potter* you're working with some of Britain's best actors. What have you learned from that?

**Daniel:** How to find the right thought and project it through your eyes, how to focus on the scene. All of them are very helpful—and Robbie Coltrane is very funny.

**Q:** What have you enjoyed most about playing Harry?

**Daniel:** I've enjoyed playing someone who is known worldwide and incredibly popular. If I meet a complete stranger and say who I am, he won't know me, but he'll know Harry.

**Q:** What have you learned about the character of Harry?

**Daniel:** That he's very loyal to his friends, that he's very brave, and not afraid to stand up for himself.

**Q:** What qualities did you relate to, and what advice would you give to anyone watching the movie?

**Daniel:** Those three things!

**Q:** Have people treated you differently since you started the movie?

**Daniel:** Not at all. My friends have been exactly the same as they were before. I've been keeping in touch with them regularly, especially with one boy who's read the fourth book eight times!

**Q:** What do you think it is about the book that makes it so popular?

**Daniel:** I think it's the whole concept of magic. It's been done before, but not on this level—it's basically about a boy whom not many people know in the Muggle world, who takes a step into wizardry, and so it's about his journey of discovery of himself.

**Q:** Have you spoken to J.K. Rowling? Has she given you any personal guidance?

**Daniel:** Not personal guidance, but I have spoken to her. She was very nice, and she said she felt that she'd been reunited with her long lost son!

**Q:** Have you read the Harry Potter books yourself?

**Daniel:** Yes, I've read all of them and I love them. I reread the second one in preparation for the role—and when I reread them now, I visualize them in terms of all the sets.

**Q:** What's the scariest thing in the movie?

**Daniel:** Definitely Fluffy the Three Headed Dog. And also the chamber with Voldemort; it's very intense and very intimate. Voldemort's face is likely to be very frightening!

**Q:** Earlier, you mentioned Robbie Coltrane—how did you get on with him?

**Daniel:** I remember him being very funny; he has an answer for everything. He's really cool.

parents. Clark feels responsible for the pain that Lana still feels from that loss.

During the summer, SCI FI added a new series, *The Chronicle*, to its prime-time lineup on Saturday night. Originally known as *News From the Edge*, the series was slated as a mid-season replacement show on NBC last year. Right around the time that the networks were jumping on the "reality show" bandwagon, NBC changed its mind about airing the show and began to shop it around. SCI FI wisely snapped it up, renamed the series, and gave it a welcome home.

*The Chronicle* is a New York tabloid newspaper that prints outrageous stories, many of them about monsters and aliens. The irony is that every story published by *The Chronicle* is actually true.

The series begins when Tucker Burns (played by Chad Willett of TV's *Joan of Arc* miniseries and *Jack & Jill*) takes a job at *The Chronicle* out of sheer desperation. Although Tucker won a student Pulitzer prize for journalism, he lost that prize when he and the rest of the world discovered that his sources—coeds telling tales on their professor—turned out to be liars. Although Tucker sends résumés to every reputable newspaper he can think of, only *The Chronicle* wants him.

Tucker's shocked when he realizes that he'll be writing real, live newspaper stories instead of fiction. He's hesitant to believe, but he soon gains allies in fellow workers Wes (played by Reno Wilson of TV's *Sliders* and *NYPD Blue*) and Grace (played by Rena Sofer of *Traffic* and *Keeping the Faith*). In fact, Wes, the newspaper's photographer, takes Tucker in under his wing as a roommate when Tucker's girlfriend, ashamed of his failure, kicks him out of their apartment. Wes soon acts not only as Tucker's friend but as his mentor.

Wilson, who is the son of a blues pianist and an opera singer, talks about his character, Wes, and his role on *The Chronicle*. "I think something happens when a person sees things, you know? I think your perception changes. Once you've seen an alien or certain paranormal things, you start looking at the world differently.

"I think once your perception changes, nothing is impossible to you at that point. The universe is your oyster. He's just excited about every day. I imagine if I knew those things existed, I would enjoy myself a little more. Life becomes outside of you—you are a part of the universe, as opposed to just a citizen of this world here. You know that you're a part of even a bigger picture. I think Wes knows that he's a part of this universal picture, as opposed to just New York City or the Earth.

"Wes was a sci-fi kid himself—it's not much of a stretch from who I am. Growing up, he probably read *The Chronicle*, and it was a dream opportunity to become the photographer for the paper."

While the show is as crazy and funny as any tabloid newspaper you're likely to find at the supermarket, *The Chronicle* also has depth. For example, one show focuses on a baby that is possessed. The grossness and humor of the show is reflected in a moment where the baby gleefully picks a cockroach up off the floor and eats it. But ultimately that same episode poses a difficult question: How do you balance your responsibilities toward your family with your responsibilities toward your job—and, in this case, toward your employees? Regardless of how bizarre any given episode

**Q:** And how did you get on with Alan Rickman, who plays the horrible Potions Master Snape, and the boy who plays Malfoy—who, after all, bullies Harry quite a bit in the books?

**Daniel:** Alan Rickman has a very dry wit—but in the potions lesson I had to keep reminding myself that it was only a film! When we started the take we'd stop larking around and focus. I share quite a lot of musical tastes with Tom Felton (Malfoy) and we get on really well. I also really liked Dudley. All the Dursleys are nice! Maggie Smith (Professor McGonagall) is another person with a dry wit—I met her when we did *David Copperfield*. She played Aunt Betsy Trotwood. She's really nice.

**Q:** What was it like meeting your co-stars, in the first photo session with Rupert (Ron) and Emma (Hermione) ?

**Daniel:** They're quite similar to their characters—Rupert's funny, Emma's intelligent.

**Q:** So do Ron and Hermione have a future together?

**Daniel:** That would be cool; I'll try and set them up! Then I'll just sit back and laugh …

**Q:** What sort of roles are you likely to be looking at in future?

**Daniel:** The thing is that Harry really is a very single role—he's got a strong emotional center, and he's a bit of an all-rounder. I'd like to do more acting, but I'm also interested in other things—writing, music, gymnastics.

**Q:** Tell us about your interest in gymnastics.

**Daniel:** I've only just got into it since we started filming, because David Holmes [an English gymnastics champion] is the stunt double and has been showing me things. I've been jumping off portakabin roofs onto mats! I've done about 90 percent of my own stunts.

**Q:** How has filming *Harry Potter* been different from making your other movies?

**Daniel:** *Harry Potter* has been similar, but on a huge scale. In the other films we were filming on one camera (*David Copperfield* had at most two) and in *Harry* we've been filming with three and sometimes four. And the sets are very different—the other films were made on location, but *HP*'s been done inside.

**Q:** What was filming it like?

**Daniel:** It was an amazing experience—there was never a boring moment. Something's always happening—and I love being around people.

**Q:** Did you take any souvenirs?

**Daniel:** No, but the wands are cool! And I wanted to keep my owl, but I can't. I was friends from the start with Hedwig—they gave me a little glove, but I had to get used to the idea of a huge bird on my arm.

**Q:** Do you read other fantasy books?

**Daniel:** I'm reading Terry Pratchett at the moment, and I like some others, like *Cirque du Freak*.

**Q:** How long have the days been on set?

**Daniel:** I have to spend about 3 to 5 hours being tutored—that's the legal amount—and it's a nine-hour day.

**Q:** Have your real teachers been as fun?

**Daniel:** Mostly, but one or two haven't! (Daniel's mum, hastily: No names!!). I've got a really fantastic tutor.

**Q:** What do you think Harry will do when he grows up?

**Daniel:** I think he'll play quidditch for England, or maybe become a teacher at Hogwarts.

**Q:** What was your favorite scene?

**Daniel:** I enjoyed all of it, but I'd pick the final chamber as a favorite—there are a lot of stunts.

**Q:** Do you predict a full seven movies?

**Daniel:** There's definitely going to be a second film, I don't know about after that. I'm pretty sure the first one will be a success, and then we might get all seven. But I doubt I'll be in all of them—I'll probably get too spotty.

**Q:** If you could do a spell, what would it be?

**Daniel:** Invisibility! Then I could sneak onto planes and go to exotic islands and get into secret meetings.

**Q:** Any final messages?

**Daniel:** I'm sure everyone will enjoy the movie. From what I've seen so far, it's going to be excellent.

Liz Williams

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*ABOVE: Shapeshifters take the form of wolves in the new CBS series* Wolf Lake.
*OPPOSITE: Tucker Burns (Chad Willett) and Wes Freewald (Reno Wilson) in* The Chronicle.

may be, at the end of the day it deals with something very real and concrete.

"This almost feels like experimental theater," Wilson says. "It feels really creative. Vince Ventresca, who plays the Invisible Man, he coined this phrase, 'independent television.' And it feels like that. It's really good actors, and shying away from the network television kind of mold, and getting really creative on cable. SCI FI is creating its own niche, and I just hope everybody continues to respond and watch the show."

As *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* moves to UPN, the big question is: How can you continue a series when the title character has died? The season finale (which was also the series' 100th episode) left us with the image of Buffy's tombstone, complete with the epigraph "She saved the world … a lot." Buffy actually has died before, and the series explained her death and return to life through its vampire slayer mythology. But this time, things will be handled differently. "The line now runs through Faith [the vampire slayer played by Eliza Dushku]," says creator and executive producer Joss Whedon. "What Buffy will be when she comes back you'll have to see. And, no, we have no plans for Eliza to be on the show at present, because she's making a bunch of movies."

In regard to how the series will revive Buffy, Whedon says, "It's not going to be simple. It's not going to be a dream sequence. It's not going to be a cheat. We did this knowing we were going to have to bring her back and that we were going to have to do it legitimately with integrity."

During the course of the season, Whedon offers a glimpse of upcoming changes. "Tony Head felt he had to step down and go back and live with his family in England. That's why he's recurring this year instead of a regular." It's been reported that Whedon is working on a short series for British television in which Head brings a different slant to his *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* character, Rupert Giles.

Whedon also discusses a shift in Willow's character. "We will see more of … the old hacker we knew from the old days. She's going to sort of re-access some of that stuff. She was introduced to it by Jenny Calendar, and Jenny Calendar's whole thing was the techno pagan, the technical and the mystical are interwoven. The two never seemed like they were antithetical to me."

In addition to *Buffy*, UPN offers up a monster-slaying show called *Special Unit 2*, which aired six episodes last spring. The series continues this fall in the coveted slot following the much-anticipated *Enterprise*, the new Star Trek series.

Special Unit 2 is the name of a secret division of the Chicago Police Department. The world is riddled with a wide variety of monsters, all of which are considered to be missing links between humans and animals. Therefore, the detectives on this special force are known as Link hunters.

Creator and Executive Producer Evan Katz (TV's *7 Days* and *JAG*) explains how *Special Unit 2* differs from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. "I think they're similar in that they're genre shows about hunting monsters, but that's a wide field. I think they're different in that *Buffy* is primarily a coming-of-age show, probably more of an ensemble show at this point, more of a soap. They're both, on some level, comedies. *Special Unit 2* is very much a black comedy. It's wacky. It's smart, but there's a strong black comedic undertone. In the best sense, they're genre shows that are smart and have humor and have monsters."

*Special Unit 2* was originally created for the

FOX network. The pilot was made two years ago. After a string of changes at FOX, *Special Unit 2* was acquired by UPN, where President and CEO Dean Valentine began to champion Katz's series. The show was recast, reconfigured, and its monsters were revamped. Katz explains that the premise of the series is that monsters in all cultures are explained as missing links. This explains why the myths in different cultures are similar. The idea is that all monsters are real—except for vampires, who are "complete and total fiction," as one character says.

"I have always loved the idea of things hiding in plain sight," Katz says. "So the blind beggar you see on the street could be a gargoyle. It's pretty wild."

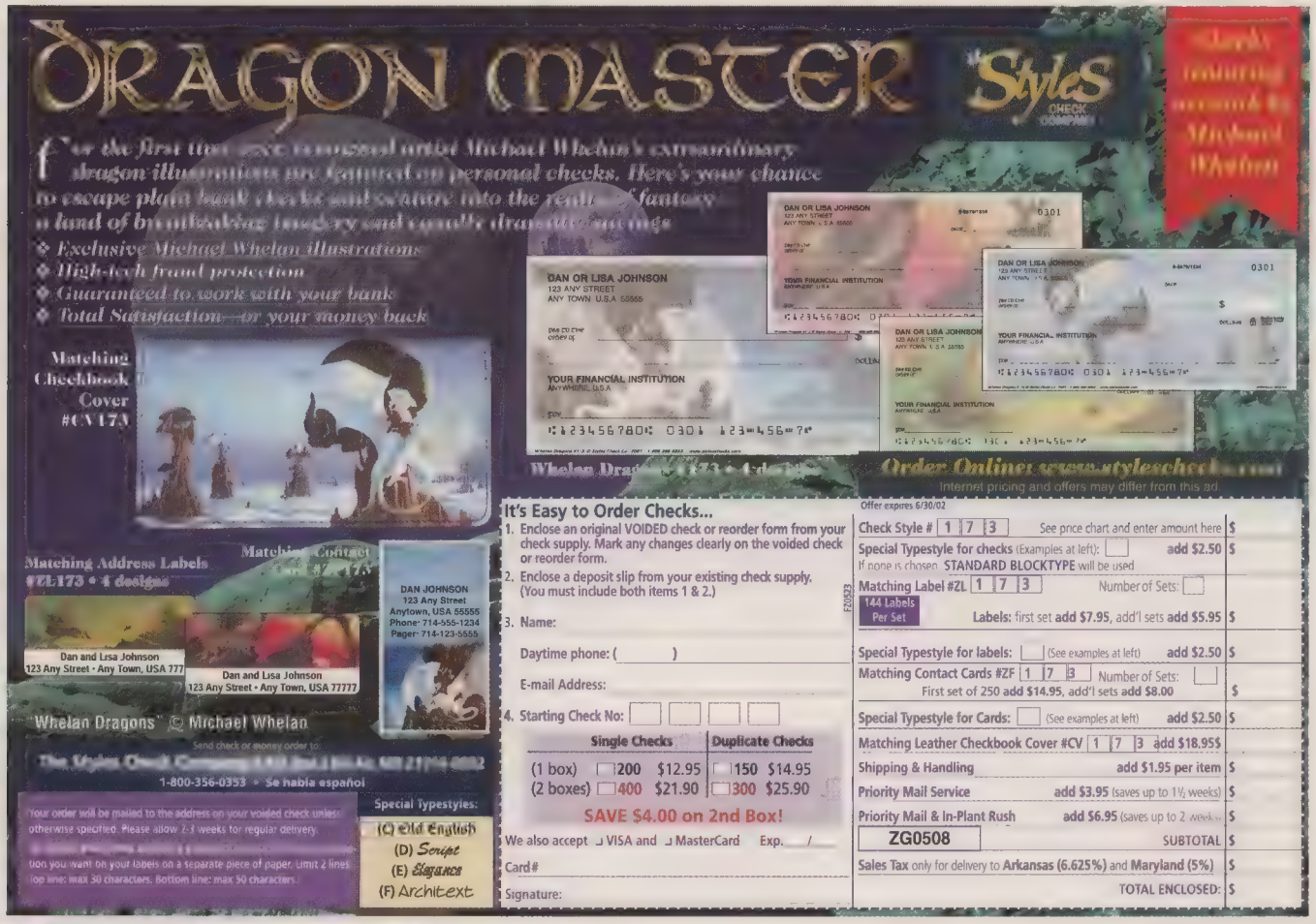
*Special Unit 2* is not a mystery or a cop procedural show. It has no skeptics or cynics. Instead, it's a mix of black comedy and action/adventure. In other words, the characters don't waste any time trying to figure out what the monsters are. They simply go out there and kill them.

The truth for the upcoming season of *The X-Files* is that David Duchovny has left the show.

"First and foremost," says Executive Producer Frank Spotnitz, "we are going to respect the characters of Mulder and Scully and what that relationship means and not take anything away from it. I know a certain section of the die-hard fans have a lot of anxiety about the fact that we're doing another year without David but with Gillian, and I think I'd like to allay their fears about that. I think we've found a way to do the show that respects what the show has been for the past 8 years and stays true to that and to those characters. Beyond that, I think there's a lot of new ground to explore with the character of Doggett, with the character of Monica Reyes, and some other new characters we're introducing this year. So, for us, it's a very exciting year because it's a new challenge, it's new questions. It's the same series, it's got the same kind of issues, the same kind of stories we've been telling, but there's so many new ways to look at these stories, thanks to these characters. It is exciting and reinvigorating for us all. I think, like last year, we will be returning again this year to what made the show great in the first place, which is scary and suspenseful stories. I don't really think there's anything else on television that's trying to tell these kind of stories right now."

Lucy Lawless (TV's *Xena: Warrior Princess*) joins the series for the first two episodes of the new season, and possibly more. "We're keeping details of what she plays under wraps," Spotnitz says. "I can tell you she's a character who you can't be sure about—you don't know for sure if she's good or bad. It gives her a chance to do a lot of different types of things. It should be interesting for her and for the audience. We're excited about it."

The big questions of the new season are how Scully's baby will fit into the picture, why Mulder will no longer be on the show, how Scully was able to conceive, and to identify those who surrounded her during the birth, all of which the series plans to address. If you're an X-phile, stayed tuned. ❧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By Gregory Frost

# The French salons gave birth to both fairy tales and animal magnetism.

The French Salons of the 17th century began as an experiment in *préciosité*—a mode of thought and behavior fashioned almost entirely by women as a reaction against the coarse and barbaric behavior of the aristocracy in general. The *précieuses*, as they were called, put forth the notion of the *homme honnête*, the man of integrity, of culture, wit, and cleverness. The salon writers were both admired and ridiculed in their time.

Illustration by Web Bryant

*Franz Anton Mesmer's fantastic theories of healing through animal magnetism have seen a revival in today's magnet and touch therapies.*

What began as a noble social experiment ultimately descended to a level of absurd pretension and affectation that encouraged the sort of behavior the salon movement had wished to transcend.

To readers of fantasy literature, the salons are most famous as the wellspring of fairy tales. Beginning in the 1630s, these aristocratic women met in each others' homes to entertain one another with tales culled from oral folk stories. Women were not allowed in universities. The salons were their intellectual alternative—places where they could discuss art, literature, and politics as well as express their wit through storytelling. Eventually some men joined them, but it was mostly a feminist phenomenon existing on the fringe of Louis XIV's court. Madame d'Aulnoy, Mademoiselle l'Heritier, Charles Perrault, and many others perfected their *contes de fées* within the salons for years before finally committing them to paper.

By the beginning of the 18th century, with the stories written down, the fairy tale culture within the salons was almost gone. It experienced a revival when, in 1704, Antoine Galland published his interpretation of *The Arabian Nights*. After that, the momentum and development of fairy tales was such that the French salons no longer shaped their landscape. Mademoiselle de Villeneuve's *Beauty and the Beast* was published in 1740, in the salon tradition, but did not spring from the same culture. The women who had begun the movement by then had died, and the stories were evolving on their own.

So, too, were the salons. The fairy tale had moved into French literary tradition, but there were many radical ideas about, and the salons remained loci for the dissemination of thought. Radical and even absurd ideas took root there—fantasies of a quite different nature.

## I. Of Steel Plates and Fluids

The 18th century can be viewed as a battleground in the struggle between religion and science.

In France notions such as Descartes' faculty of natural light—that we are reasonable creatures and have it within ourselves to recognize and act upon that which is right *because* of our reason—propelled the French toward a social revolution. The first revolution occurred, however, in the sciences.

Rationalism declared that the world is available to anyone who views it through the lens of reason. Observation leads to knowledge—or ought to. Furthermore, knowledge should properly organize into a single

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system. The problem was, no one agreed on what that system should look like. Instead, there was a clash of systems, each with adherents and detractors, and each based upon "reasoned" observation.

Mesmerism was such a system.

It appeared in the 1770s through the work of the man whose name the system bears—Franz Anton Mesmer.

As a student at the University of Vienna, Mesmer read the works of Paracelsus, a 16th-century alchemist and healer, who claimed to have created a homunculus, and to have successfully extracted diseases from human bodies with a magnet and then transferred the afflictions into the earth, which makes him, I suppose, the creator of the first toxic waste dump.

His magnets made a greater impression on Mesmer than they presumably did upon the earth. Mesmer also read a 1673 treatise by Professor Sebastian Wirdig, which argued that a magnetic force bound all celestial bodies and even the individual bodies of humankind—all of life in fact; and the work of William Maxwell, who insisted that to work cures, one had to draw forth the "spirit from its slumbers."

This Mesmer could do. He had a powerful, commanding personality. Portraits of him show a man with dark penetrating eyes beneath heavy brows. At 32, he completed a dissertation on how the planets influenced the human body, graduated from the University of Vienna, and married a considerably older and wealthier patient of his.

Comfortably well off, he began organizing the ideas of Paracelsus into a rational system, theorizing that an invisible "fluid" connected all of life and even filled the void between the planets.

While Mesmer was shaping his system, a Jesuit professor of astronomy at the University of Vienna named Maximilian Hehl was experimenting with magnetic plates.

An Englishwoman passing through Vienna had contacted him to cure her stomach cramps. He'd applied magnetized steel plates to her stomach, and her cramps had disappeared. In 1774, he described his success to Mesmer, who immediately began to treat his own patients with magnets. One of these was a woman who suffered from attacks of hysteria.

To begin, Mesmer had the woman drink a solution of tiny iron particles. Then he attached the magnetic plates to her legs and lower torso. The woman shortly announced that she could feel waves of energy coursing through her body, precisely as good Dr. Mesmer had promised. The power of the waves increased until, overwhelming her, they triggered another fit of hysteria. Mesmer had succeeded in inducing her fits. Now he must eradicate them. He brought her back for repeated sessions of magnetic treatment. Each time, she drank the potion and he applied his magnets. With each successive treatment the fits ebbed away until they ceased altogether. Triumphant, Mesmer shared his success with Professor Hehl.

*In France, Mesmer began to host his own salons in order to effect mass cures. These sessions were closer to orgies than to the intellectual gatherings of traditional salons.*

Hehl soon published a discourse on the medical use of magnets, incorporating Mesmer's examples. He referred to Mesmer as an assistant, a student. Mesmer responded with an attack in which he claimed *he'd* invented the magnetic system. When Hehl won local support, Mesmer attempted to defeat him by writing of "his" magnetic discoveries to various scientific and medical societies all over Europe, describing how he'd tapped into invisible fields of energy. Proof of their existence was the fact that the treatments worked.

Further, he wrote that on one occasion as he was bleeding a patient, he saw the blood flow increase when he drew near and decrease when he moved away from the patient. His own body, he concluded, must have the same power as magnetic plates. He tried using his hands to alter the fields created by the invisible fluid, sliding them over the patient's body. Blood flow varied as his hands traveled. His hands were having an effect by themselves. For him this was proof that his hypothetical fluid did connect otherwise discontinuous living bodies. He coined a term for the phenomenon: *animal magnetism.* He had a system and worked thereafter to refine it.

Over time he magnetized "paper, bread, wool, silk, stones, leather, glass, wood, men and dogs … to such a degree that these substances produced the same effects as [a] lodestone on diseased persons." It might have been interesting to watch him run a dog up and down someone's body for its curative effects. Madame Blavatsky take note.

In Vienna, Mesmer appeared before the German medical academy. He asserted that he had uncovered the source of all disease. Accepted treatments of the day—leeches, purgatives, and even bleeding, which only recently he'd performed himself—were at best ineffectual and at worst deadly. The success of *any* treatment, he asserted, depended upon the will of the physician, who passed what energies he harnessed on to the patient. Tap the invisible dynamic fluid of animal magnetism, and any powerful healer could work miracles. Failure to heal became a failure not of Mesmer's system but of the physician. The system was flawless.

It comes as no surprise that men who applied leeches and performed bloodletting for a living did not embrace the news.

Having alienated the medical establishment, Mesmer attempted an extraordinary proof: He would give sight to a blind girl. Her name was Maria Paradies, and unfortunately for Mesmer her blindness was *not* hysterical. She had detached retinas. Like so many fairy tale heroines, Maria fell under Mesmer's spell and after a few sessions desperately insisted that she could now make out vague shapes. It wasn't true.

Her family soon got wind of how Mesmer conducted his "cure." His technique involved quite a lot of fondling, notably of the knees, thighs, and breasts. The family decided to remove her from his influence. Although Maria put up a fight to remain in his care, the family won out, and the authorities were called in. Mesmer proclaimed it was all part of a cruel conspiracy against him. The authorities must sort it all out.

By then, Mesmer had packed up and fled. Almost upon the instant she was removed from his care, Maria's blindness returned. Mesmer thought he had escaped. He was wrong.

## II. Salon Life

In 1779, just a few years before Charles Mayer produced the definitive 41-volume collection of salon fairy tales, *Le Cabinet des Fées,* Mesmer published *Mémoire sur la Découverte du Magnétisme Animal.* By then he had settled in Paris, where the book of his philosophy was published. In the experimental French salons, Mesmer found his perfect audience.

There was no standard governing what constituted medical treatment. The nature of disease and its cure remained mysterious. Strange devices such as "electro-medico-celes-

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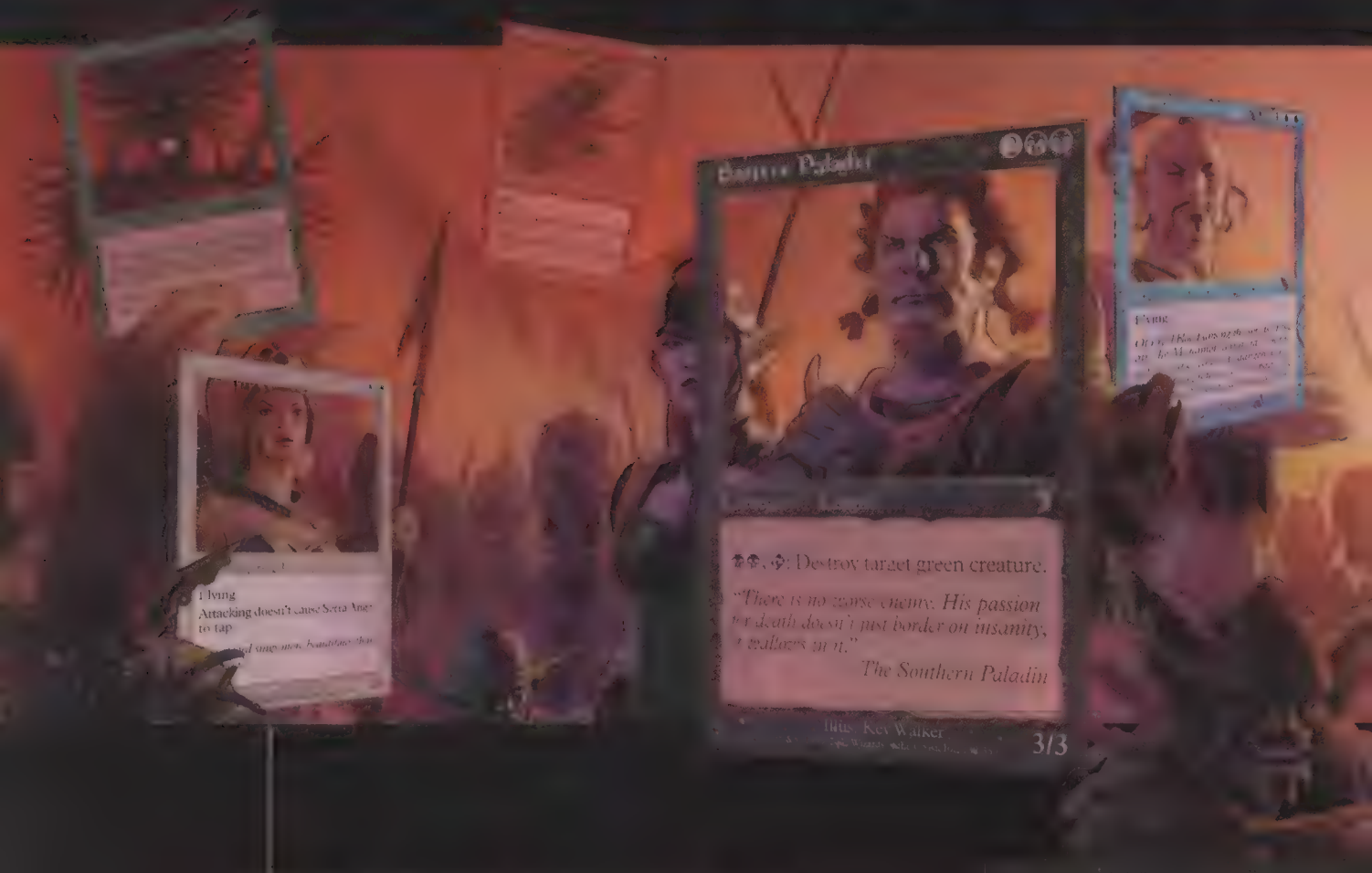
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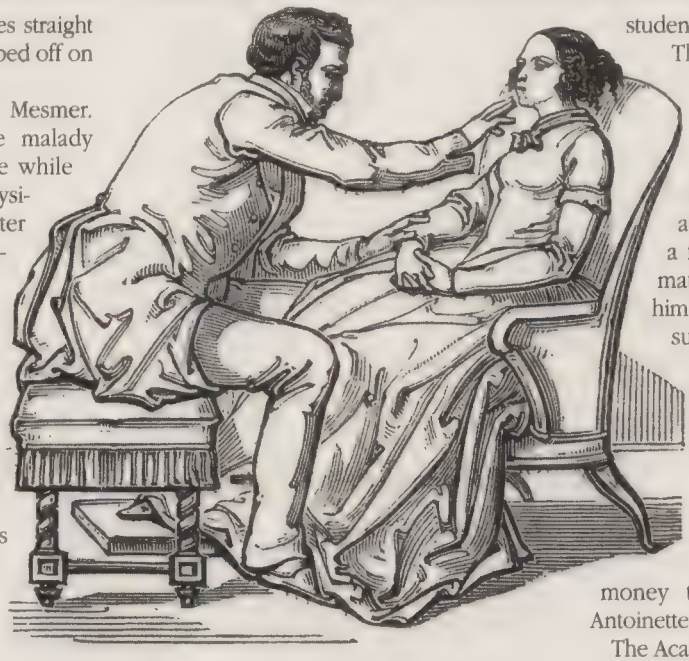
tial beds" and elixirs with properties straight out of the *Arabian Nights* were fobbed off on an ignorant, self-medicating public.

Neurotic aristocrats sought out Mesmer. Those not suffering from some malady wanted to watch those who were while Mesmer worked on them. Naive physicians defended him, to their later regret. Invited to soirées, he convinced most of his audience that he held the secrets of the universe.

Mesmer's belief in his dynamic fluid and in the principles of animal magnetism was completely sincere: His belief fueled belief in others. Like Paracelsus, he was hugely egotistical and certainly venal. The devotion of so many wealthy Parisian hypochondriacs swelled his head like one of the Montgolfier brothers' hot-air balloons.



*Some of Mesmer's patients lost complete control of themselves under his hands-on magnetism. But, they often left feeling refreshed, invigorated, and cured—for the evening.*

Mesmer's sessions took on the atmosphere of a party, an orgy. Too many people wanted the great master, and he contrived a way to accommodate them all. Instead of going to their homes, they would pay to come to his. He would host his own salons and effect mass cures. The means to do this came in the form of a device called the *baquet.*

As the name implies, it was a tub. Made of oak, about four feet in diameter and one foot deep, it could accommodate as many as 20 people at once. Within it stood jars or wine bottles filled with "magnetized" water. The containers were corked, lying on their sides with the necks projecting outward. Water to cover the jars was poured into the tub and iron particles sprinkled in. Then a lid was fitted over the whole affair. The lid had small portholes through which protruded iron rods. While holding hands and pressing their knees against the people next to them, patients pressed the rods against their afflicted parts. Gathered behind them, Mesmer's assistants then began rubbing their backs or their breasts—most of the patients were female—their thighs and feet. No one spoke.

A soprano sang from another room so that her disembodied voice wafted ghostly through the beautiful salon. He had outfitted it with stained-glass windows. Orange blossoms scented the air. Incense burned in the corners. In this heady, almost hallucinatory atmosphere, it wasn't long before a few of the more suggestible patients began collapsing in orgasmic fits.

Then Mesmer appeared. Wrapped in a lilac and gold silk robe, carrying a wand of ivory, he strode imperiously among them. His dark eyes caught and held their gaze. He ran his wand over each patient. For some, their *crises* of delirium ceased and they grew quiet. Many others lost complete control of themselves at his touch and were carried by assistants to an adjoining room where they were treated to an extra dose of hands-on magnetism, usually resulting in further orgasmic crisis and catharsis. Everybody emerged from their adventure refreshed, invigorated, and often claiming to be cured of what ailed them. At least for an evening: The experience proved habit-forming.

The salon's reputation spread quickly. The French medical establishment, like the Germans before them, found his apotheosis absolutely galling. They petitioned to make him prove his claims.

He had also attracted the attention of the Queen of France. Marie Antoinette believed devoutly in animal magnetism. Mesmer wrote to her, requesting a pension and his own château. He insisted upon the amount of "four or five hundred thousand francs" for further research. He would be set up for life.

He was not, however, the only influence upon the queen. He was offered only 20,000 francs, and that on the condition that the authorities first satisfy themselves about his cures. On the advice of one of his medical devotees, Monsieur D'Eslon, Mesmer refused to submit. By now he was, after all, the *renowned* Mesmer, the darling of the salons. He left Paris for Spa on the pretense of taking the waters, and D'Eslon in his stead was taken before the Faculty of Medicine and ordered to renounce his belief in mesmerism or suffer expulsion. Not only did D'Eslon refuse, but he promised further breakthroughs. The Faculty formed a committee to oppose Mesmer. At the same time the Academy of Sciences formed its own investigative commission. As Mesmer had taken himself out of the picture, both bodies began their inquisitions without him.

Some of his worshippers followed him to Spa. One of them, named Bergasse, offered to open up a subscription to a teaching forum for Mesmer, which would accept one hundred students paying one hundred louis each. The master would teach them his secrets, and the students would agree to keep the secrets to themselves while opening curative salons across Europe, expanding his sphere of influence in court after court, nation upon nation, like a fast-food franchise for psychosomatics. Imagining a fortune before him, Mesmer agreed. Bergasse filled the subscriptions in a matter of days. Thus before the medical community could begin probing, Mesmer had created his Societies of Harmony—in effect, disseminating his message through the salons before the medical authorities could do anything to limit the damage. He now had more money than he'd demanded of Marie Antoinette.

The Academy of Sciences had been created specifically to weed superstition out of the scientific garden. Mesmer was a perfect subject for them.

Members of the commission included such esteemed individuals as the great chemist Lavoisier, the historian Bailly, and the American diplomat and scientist Benjamin Franklin. They labored on the mesmeric topic for five months. From interviews with his patients they discovered that Mesmer had successfully cured some people. The committee was unanimous, however, in their opinion that the remissions, when they *did* occur, were due entirely to the patient's own beliefs. Of the touted all-pervasive magnetic fluid—the true focus of the inquiry—they found no trace. The cures were deemed irrelevant because Mesmer had no magnetic powers.

He attempted to refute them, but the commission rejected his appeals.

Thereafter, he became a subject of increasing derision. One sly physician went to him with a false story of illness, accepted treatment for it, and pretended to be cured. He then wrote and published a scathing version of the events, portraying Mesmer as a fool and a charlatan.

And then, when it seemed that he could be humiliated no further, Maria Paradies, the blind pianist and his former patient, arrived in Paris to give a concert. The story of her "treatment" by Mesmer became the gossip of the hour in the very salons where he had only recently won devotion. At her concerts everyone could see that Maria was clearly, uncontestably blind.

Mesmer could stand no more. He took the small fortune remaining from Bergasse's subscriptions and fled across the border, back to Austria, where he bought a small house not far from Lake Constance. He remained there until his death in 1815.

In retiring, Mesmer escaped the chaos of the French Revolution, where other "scientists" did not fare so well. The revolution also

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put an end to the aristocratic salon experiments. The civilizing effect of women upon the contentious males had ossified well before then, in any case. Those whose salons still thrived at the end, like Madame Roland, found that their path ended at the guillotine.

## III. Of Tractors and Detractors

After Mesmer quit the scene, charlatans and well-meaning but misguided physicians took up his cause. On the continent, Cagliostro used mesmerism to promote his dubious reputation.

In England, an American named Benjamin Douglas Perkins, a self-styled surgeon, introduced what he called "metallic tractors": two pieces of magnetized metal that, when applied against the body, could cure nearly anything.

Perkins, a Quaker, got the Society of Friends to give his invention a tremendous reception. He made a small fortune before a Doctor Haygarth from Bath built some *wooden* tractors of his own and painted them to look the same as Perkins' magnets. After he'd "cured" half a dozen patients with them, he wrote up his findings in a widely distributed pamphlet, *Of the Imagination, as a Cause and Cure of Disorders, exemplified by Fictitious Tractors.*

In response, Perkins applied his tractors to farm animals. Belief and imagination could *not* account for their cures. Unfortunately, neither could the animals tell anyone that they felt better. Perkins spoke on their behalf, embarrassing everyone, and finally had to flee the country.

Some years later in Lyon, a gentleman named Barbarin approached mesmerism from a revolutionary perspective, doing away with *all* paraphernalia. The will of the operator alone, said Barbarin, induced trance. There were *no* invisible fluids: Lavoisier and Franklin had been right.

His theory implied that mind and body could divorce from one another.

With Barbarin, mesmerism took its first real step toward what we know it as today: hypnosis. It took the medical establishment a long time to credit hypnosis with any legitimacy. Regrettably, it seems to have arrived with all its fantastic elements attached: No less ludicrous than Mesmer's salon cures are past-life regressions and "recovered" memories of Satanic rituals perpetrated upon children by their parents.

Today, while we celebrate renewed interest in fairy tales, we also confront revivals of both the *magnet* and *touch* therapies that followed them through the salons. Instead of tractors we have "tectonic" magnets, but the application is the same. Touch therapy, where the hands are run lightly over the body of the patient, is identical to Mesmer's magnetic practice.

The antipodes of French salon culture—fairy tales and Mesmerism—continue to thrive right into our new century. Both remain as fantastic as ever they were. ❧

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By Gahan Wilson

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*Wicked* cover illustration by Douglas Smith

Looking back on it I now realize that quite early on as a very young child I had come to accept the notion that all of the Oz books were travel guides and that the main difference between them and those reporting on doings in Japan and France was that there really *was* a Japan and a France existing out there in the grownup world and that Oz did not really exist—though I remember on many occasions trying to believe it did—but had been discovered, as you might say, by dear old L. Frank Baum in his head.

Baum's version of Oz was very much influenced by the feel of his own time period and his personal life history, as is true of all reportage, and so he perceived it as a rather raw agrarian society well stocked with adventurous people who would leave their neighbors behind in its more settled areas to go off on daring explorations into the mysterious depths of its unknown and dangerous locales and there more often than not discover startling environments with bizarre geographies which were populated by a rich variety of wild and strange people very unlike those left behind in the Emerald City.

Often the adventurers would find themselves seriously endangered by these weird places and/or their bizarre inhabitants and would have to take strong measures to insure their safe survival, but there was seldom any serious harm done by them and the only denizens who had any real cause to fear the bold pioneers were particularly evil and monstrous creatures.

But there was a "but" for—again, even as a child—I can recall often noticing odd incongruities, peculiar and baffling things which it seemed to me were rather glided over with very little expansion. Children, like pets and other animals, are very much altered by incongruities and find it very difficult to stop fussing over them. So it was with me.

There was one huge, outstanding thing that struck me as being most particularly odd about Oz according to Baum's own canon and, to put the matter frankly, it made me seriously puzzle at considerable length over whether the first and most beloved scribe of Oz was being naïve or engaged in some sort of involved and possibly shady sort of coverup!

Baum firmly and clearly makes it known to the readers his firm conviction that there was no death in the colorful fairyland; that no one ever really dies in the magical kingdom (true, the Wizard does slice a sorcerer in two with fatal results in *Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz*, however the postmortem examination of its divided remains establishes the fact that the creature was actually a vegetable), but that confident assertion was flatly and spectacularly contradicted by Baum himself right at the start by the very first and hugely important event which I and all other devotees of his books saw take place for ourselves in *The Wizard of Oz*, the first and founding book of the whole entire series: Dorothy's house hurtles down from the sky above Munchkin Country, bangs down on the Wicked Witch of the East, and kills her!

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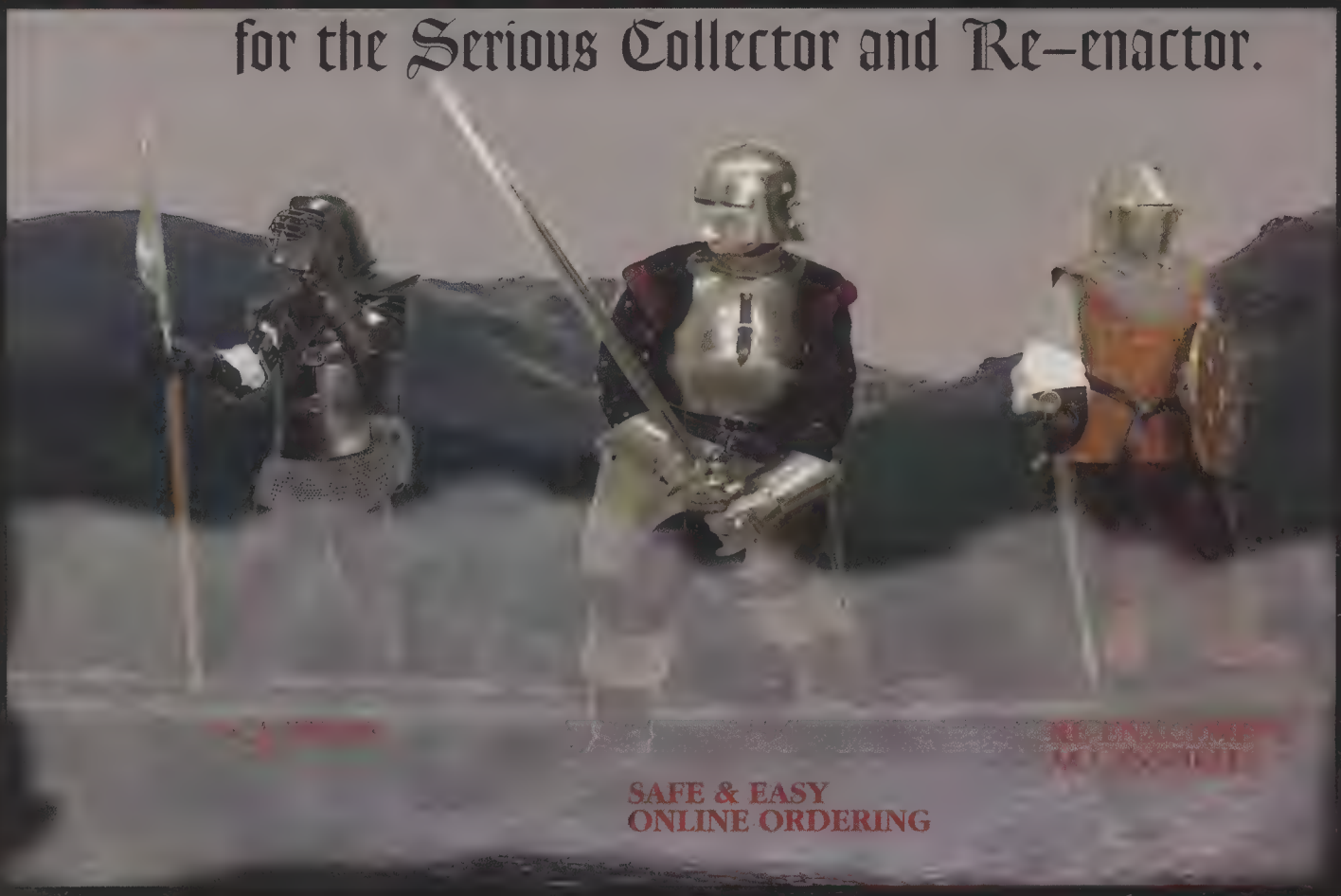


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Another almost graver bafflement for me and, I am sure, all other serious students to ponder over was the downright startling depiction of the Wizard in the second book, *The Land of Oz*, as a very sinister figure, indeed, who not only usurps the throne in the palace of the Emerald City but magically disguises Ozma—even from herself!—so that she will not threaten his stolen powers. True enough, when he shows up in the third book, *Ozma of Oz*, he has reverted to being the lovable humbug we knew of yore, yet still my active young mind could not help but wonder yet again if some kind of dark concealment was afoot.

But even though these nagging wonderments persisted to puzzle my still forming brain, I continued to love the books unabashedly and so I not only avidly devoured all 14 of Baum's travelogues on Oz but the even longer series of books reporting the fabulous realm written by Ruth Plumly Thompson, who was appointed the Royal Historian of Oz after Baum left this Kansas version of our world and—as I did and do still fondly hope—traveled on to exist forever after in his bright and shining version of the Five Colored Country.

Thompson's coverage of Oz commenced in the Roaring Twenties, then ran through them and the following years of the Great Depression to finish off lightheartedly with her freewheeling *Ozoplaning with the Wizard of Oz* in 1939 to coincide with the opening of the wonderful movie which still continues to delight every child I've ever seen observing it.

Although almost all of the publicity released concerning Ms. Thompson stresses the fact that she lived quietly with her mother, her photos show her to be an attractive, perky woman with bobbed hair and a definite glint in her eye. Her books have a decidedly new kind of rascality that is much less countrified than Baum's, the humor is markedly more "Twenty-Three Skiddoo" (a snappy slang phrase of the period I have only recently learned refers to the fact that the wind around the Flat Iron Building on Manhattan's 23rd Street lifted women's skirts intriguingly) and there is—I'll swear it—a faint smell of gin and olives wafting gently through the pages of her books. Or is it a twist of lemon? In any case, nowhere in her books did I detect any ominous implications.

The series was briefly taken up by John R. Neil, who profusely illustrated all of the Oz books save for the very first, and they are as gentle and grandfatherly as his drawings. After that Jack Snow, otherwise mostly known for his science fiction, contributed a couple of amusing travelogues and since then a quantity of loving fans—most of them enthusiastic members of the International Wizard of Oz Club—have brought out reports on Oz adventures of widely varying quality.

I have detected no particularly suspicious activities on the part of any of these latter contributors and, frankly, save for the occasional browse through the beloved old books and a rerun now and then of my cassette of the movie (which seems to have grown tired and in need replacing, come to think on it!), Oz, and my dark suspicions concerning it, pretty much faded from my mind.

Then, in a huge bookstore in New York City, I noticed a hardcover book displayed in the children's section called ***Wicked,*** by Gregory Mcguire (Regan Books/Harper Collins, New York; trade paperback; 406 pp.; $15.00) which purported to be the telling of the story of the Wicked Witch of the West from *her* point of view. I was decidedly intrigued and on the point of buying it when I suddenly realized I was late

# books to watch for

***The Thirteenth Scroll***, by Rebecca Neason, Warner Aspect paperback, $6.99. A clairvoyant 17-year-old heroine called Lysandra sets out on a quest to find the true source of a troubling vision. She encounters Father Renan, a priest, who has been responsible for her visions. He needs her help in stopping two evil overlords. According to prophesy it is up to Lysandra herself to find a new queen and protect her from the evil that would prevent her installation on the throne of Agha- more. This is the first of two novels featuring the herbalist and blind female healer, Lysandra. Her mystic inner "sight" will guide and protect her in her quest. A traditional fantasy with a strong, nontraditional heroine that will enthrall the reader with thrilling adventure.

***Deep Midnight,*** by Shannon Drake, Zebra Books paperback, $6.99. New York Times best-selling novelist Shannon Drake has written a tale of mystery and legend. A young book critic, Jordan Riley, attends Carnivale celebrations in Venice. There she is rescued by a powerful man disguised as a wolf. But is this simply part of Carnivale entertainment—or is it something of a more sinister nature? Her rescuer—is he stalker or savior? A terrifying journey of darkness and decadence.

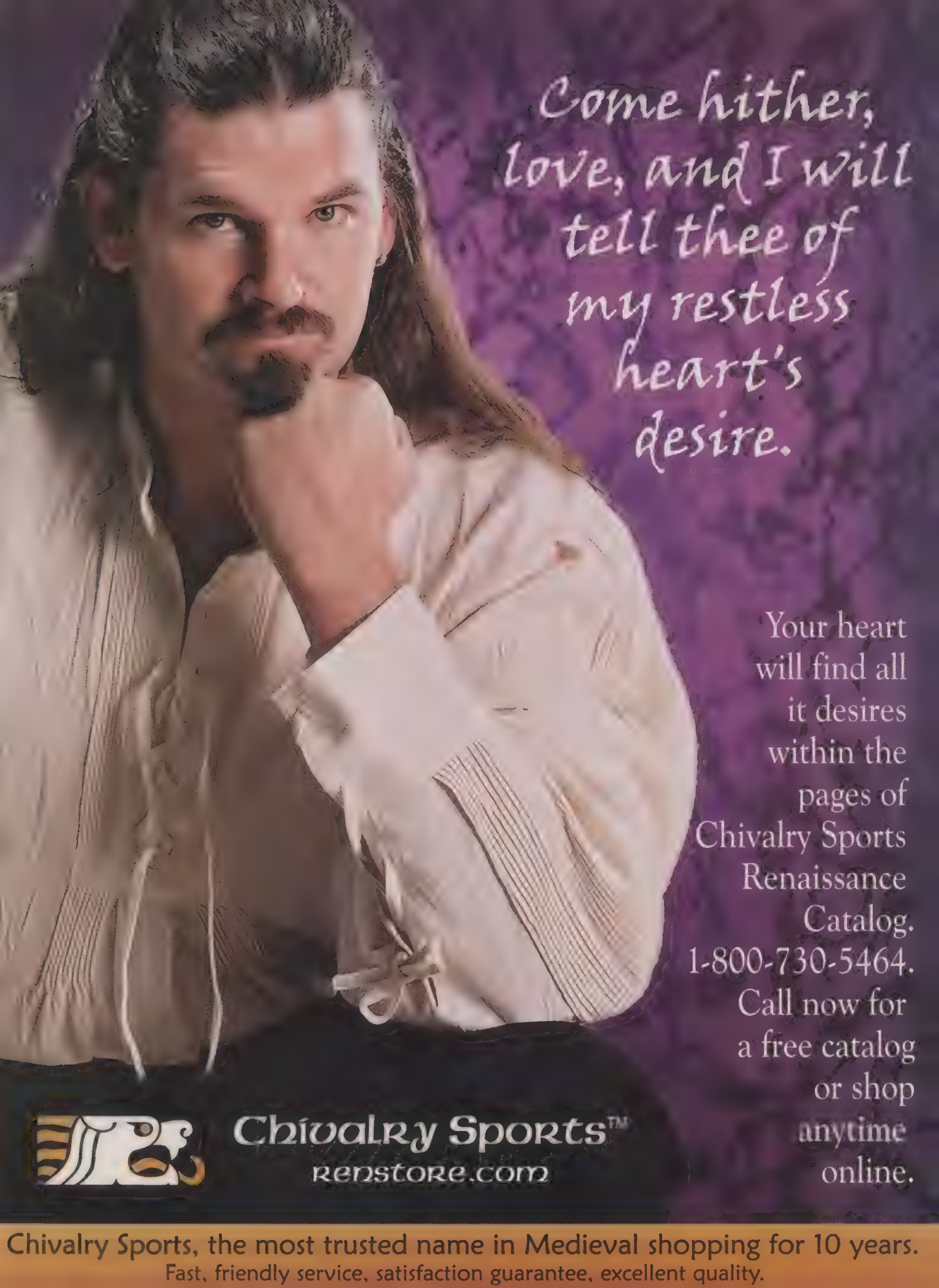
***Stories for an Enchanted Afternoon,*** by Kristine Katherine Rusch, Golden Gryphon Press hardcover, $24.95. This is a collection of award-winning author Rusch's best short fiction. Stories include "The Gallery of His Dreams," a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards. The collection also includes "Skin Deep," "Millennium Babies," and "Echea." Author Rusch says "short stories form the basis of all her writing, she gets her novel ideas from them and she likes to experiment in them."

With a foreword by the co-author of *Dune: House Atreides,* Kevin J. Anderson, this collection is a must have for all fantasy lovers and for fans of *Realms*. Stories by Rusch and Anderson have graced *ROF*s pages in the past.

***A Woman's Liberation: A Choice of Futures by and about Women,*** edited by Connie Willis and Sheila Williams, Warner Aspect paperback, $12.95. "Spanning every style and theme in speculative fiction, this amazing collection of ten stories includes works by Octavia Butler, Ursula Le Guin, Anne McCaffrey, S.N. Dyer, and Jane Yolen, to name a few. These stories were originally published in *Asimov's* and *Analog* magazines. According to Editor Willis one will find "princesses, prisoners, surgeons, slaves, snake handlers, sorrow, silence, and the unexpected" within these pages. There are stories by "veterans" and stories by "new kids on the block ..." but most importantly you will find the scope and genesis of visionary female fiction.

***User Unfriendly,*** by Vivian Vande Velde, Magic Carpet Books paperback, $6.00. For the 12 and older set comes a tale of "virtual reality" and "genuine death." Imagine a computer role-playing game so advanced that when you play, you are really there. The game plugs into your brain directly, sans keyboard. Hacker Arvin Rizalli and company discover the hard way that there is no hope of rescue when the game goes horribly awry ...

***Conan the Rebel,*** by Poul Anderson, Tor Books hardcover, $23.95. Mighty barbarians, savage pirates, freedom, and tyranny are at the heart of this grand adventure. *Conan the Rebel* is the first of four Conan novels that Tor will reprint in Trade. Evil reptile gods, the beauty Belit, and a traditional fantasy of war and redemption ... "Anderson has produced more milestones in contemporary science fiction and fantasy than any one man is entitled to ..." ❧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*The Wicked Witch of the West, as played by Margaret Hamilton in the 1939 film, has both terrified and fascinated several generations of viewers.*

for a luncheon appointment, foolishly put the matter off, and when, some weeks later, I checked with the clerks of the same store the name of the book had floated from my mind and smiling but unhelpful clerks were unable to recall any volume remotely resembling my description.

Now, when I recently came across a well-produced trade paperback edition of *Wicked* in another, smaller bookstore, I struck like a tiger and bought it on the spot (even though I was risking being late for yet another luncheon appointment!), settled down to read it the very next day and I am now imploring you not to commit my hideous error and foolishly put off purchasing this gem of a fantasy by Gregory Maguire who is decidedly as much of a man of his time as L. Frank Baum was of his, as his reportage of Oz clearly shows.

I can certainly claim no originality in my enthusiasm for *Wicked* since the cover and opening pages of this edition are littered with quotes from an army of distinguished critics and authors tumbling over one another to praise Maguire's acheivement and they are right to do so.

The book is, as advertised, a telling of the story as it looked to the Wicked Witch of the West and it leaves no doubt that Maguire is a fond and profound scholar of the Oz stories, both books and film, and that he was deeply moved by them and also as troubled by their implications and inconsistencies as—I am sure—legions of children have been.

There is, at the end of the book, a "Reader's Group Guide" which is very helpful and also, I suppose, an indication that *Wicked* is regarded as a children's book. I have commented before on my inability to grasp the subtle differences between childrens' books, young adult books, adult books, and old peoples' books so I won't go on about it here. I bring it up only because it leads off by giving the simple reason why Maguire came to name the Witch Elphaba "(pronounced EL-fa-ba)" which I had now and then wondered about

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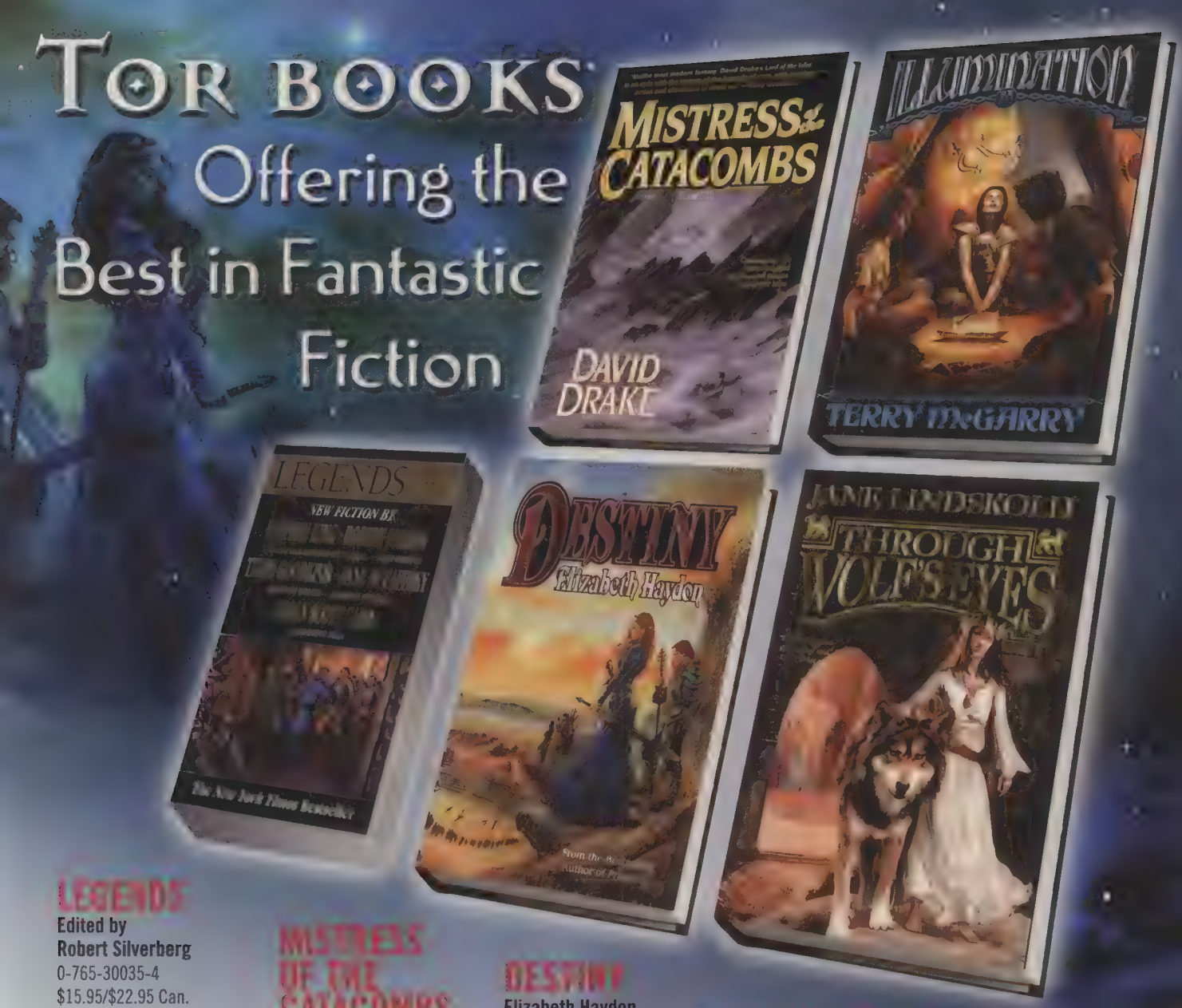


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—*Publishers Weekly*

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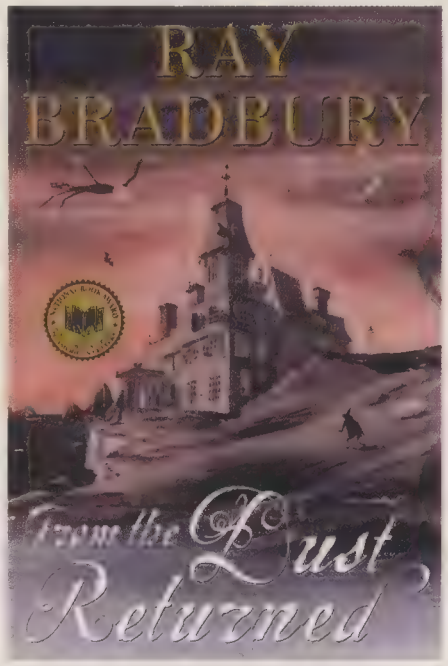
during the process of reading the book: It's based on the initials of the original travelologist Lyman Frank Baum!

Elphaba is born to Frex, a middle-class preacher, and Melena, his high-born, lusty wife. They are living in a dreary section of Munchkinland where Frex concernedly tries to minister to his flock of parishioners.

The baby does not wail as a baby ought to as it pops out into the world and when she is cleansed of caul and blood the midwives are seriously considering killing the child since they see that her skin is not pink but a vegetable green when the little creature bites one of the women's fingers off at the second knuckle with her horrific, shark-like teeth and they decide trying to harm her might be dangerous and so abandon her with her mother.

In total despair over the unmanageable grotesqueness of her weird offspring, Melena sends for her old Nanny from Colwan Grounds, the dwelling place of her well-born family, and the aged woman hauls herself out of retirement and proves herself an enormous help in Elphaba's upbringing, seeing to it, for instance, that the child learns to play and rough and tumble with other children rather than be secreted away and always on her lonely own.

Of course none of this stops her from being a wonderfully spooky child. It is often difficult to tell whether she's wincing or

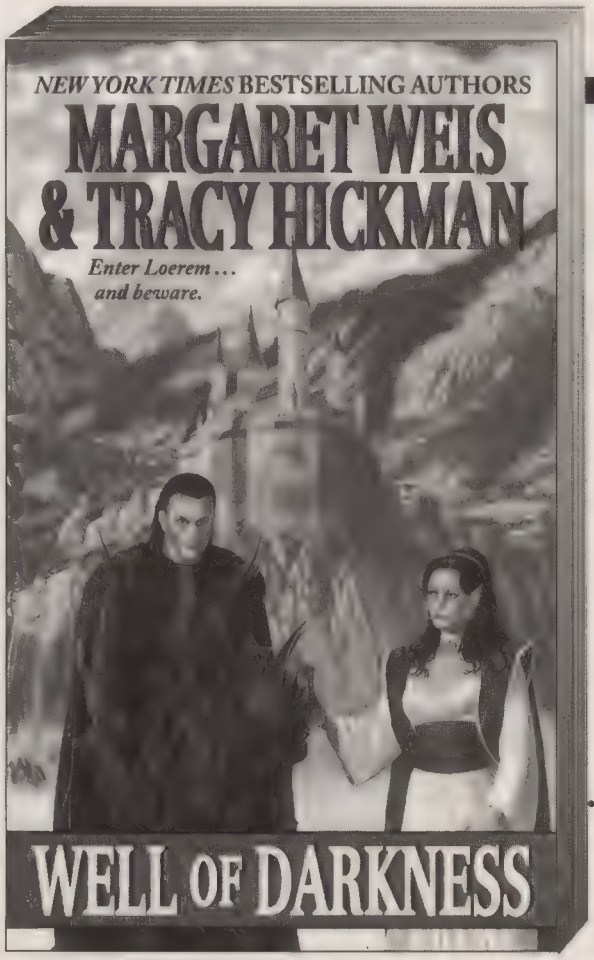



smiling, for instance; she has a way of snapping at the air with those teeth that is very disconcerting; early on she demonstrates a natural leaning to things magical, deriving much pleasure from a skrying glass made for her by a wandering Quadling glassblower and the first word she speaks—or rather blurts out with a thrilled, bright air of delighted discovery—is "Horrors."

Though he plays brilliantly with subtly altering and re-representing the basic concepts and characters of Oz as it has been reported to us before, throwing revealing new illuminations on it and viewing it from sometimes genuinely shocking perspectives, Maguire is always scrupulously careful never to violate the basis of the original material and to always work within the parameters of the original fantasy. Throughout the whole of his book Maguire plays fair.

The Wizard, for instance, is the Wizard of my darkest suspicions, the plotting politician momentarily visible in that second book now shown with sometimes merciless clarity, but he is also the Wizard of the other books: he talks like him, he has the same practicality, the same constant interest in bettering his magic, the same air of tidiness, the same self-doubts.

Another example is the careful and loving development by Maguire of Glinda. One nice touch is that when we see her first as a spoiled, self-centered young woman she is forever firmly insisting people pronounce her name "Galinda" in the proper old Munchkin fashion. It struck me as absolutely right that she would do this. Great but accurate fun is also had by kindly mocking her fondness for frou-frou and overdressing which were glaringly evident in all those drawings of her by John R. Neill and the get up worn by Billie Burke in the movie—all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those silly, sparkly flounces ... and that gaudy wand with the star on its tip!

This report on Oz is oftentimes grim and disturbing as the author deeply explores the notions of good and evil, which is the essential theme of the book (*Wicked* is dedicated to "... all those who taught me to love and fear goodness") but it by no means abandons the unabashed sort of silly humor we have encountered before in Oz. As examples, it turns out that the Tin Woodman's highly unfortunate condition is the result of domestic violence; that you should never call any Vinku of the Western Country a "Winkie" as that's a dreadfully insulting slur; that the mortgage of the house that landed on the Wicked Witch of the East doesn't belong so much to Auntie Em and Uncle Henry as it does to the Mechanics and Farmers First State Bank of Wichita and that the tiktok labor force is secretly plotting class revolution.

By no means miss this opportunity to revisit Oz!

***From the Dust Returned*** by Ray Bradbury (William Morrow, NYC; hardcover; 203 pp.; $23.00) is another fantasy classic revisted, but this time by its original author and we even have an accounting by that author of how it all took place in an accompanying Afterword packed full of information new to me and perhaps to you.

The fantasy is a short story called "The Homecoming" by Ray Bradbury. It was written back in the mid-1940s at the tag end of Bradbury's *Weird Tales* days but it did not appear in that magazine because they refused it and so it eventually appeared—of all places—in *Mademoiselle* magazine which surrounded it with October essays by various notables in celebration of Halloween.

I would have sworn on a tall stack of *grimoires* that story had first surfaced in *Weird Tales*; I can even conjure up an appropriate illustration drawn for it by Boris Dolgov, one of that spooky publication's best regular illustrators, but my subconscious has obviously liftied it from some other tale. *Mademoiselle*, for God's sake!

In any case, 55 years later Bradbury has taken "The Homecoming" and lovingly expanded it into a novel and I can confidently assure you that anyone who, like myself, has long been haunted by the original tale will find reading this book a sweet confirmation of one's past opinions and my guess is that anyone first encountering this particular Bradburian world is likely to be deeply delighted at the discovery.

The main character of both story and novel is a huge, magical House looming somewhere in the Midwest farmland, assembled there by the wind and supernatural powers as a shelter for dark creatures of the night.

The guardians of the House are the Elliots, a wildly varied and thoroughly terrifying family that is at the same time—thanks to Bradbury's unique skill at necromancy—

totally lovable.

One dark autumn night three of the family hear wailing from the outer darkness and leave the House to find a baby boy tucked into a picnic basket left by the iron gate. They examine him with awe, fascinated by the healthy pinkness of his skin, the sound of his breathing, and the astounding discovery that he makes a reflection in a mirror!

After a brief, if intense, discussion the woman carries the babe inside the house and up to a tomblike room of great elegance that is muraled with Egyptian paintings designed to lighten eternity for pharaohs' offspring who have died before their time. She declares it is henceforth a nursery, that the babe shall be named Timothy, and that he is now and forevermore, living or dead, an Elliot.

From then on we are often in the company of Timothy, along with his pet spider, Arach, and his cat, Anuba, and we encounter other members of the family for the first time when he does. Cecy, for instance, who forever dwells in the high attic but who sends forth her mind to enter others' bodies, sometimes with unfortunate consequences, or we are thrilled along with him at the awesome sight of Uncle Einer standing, as he does, eight feet tall and weighing three hundred pounds, but who can fly with the quick grace of a bat because of his huge green wings.

The tone of *From the Dust Returned* is far too freewheeling, however, to be restricted to the vicinity of any one character or point of view and glides easily from the main narrative to side stories that sometimes connect directly back to the Elliots and sometimes don't, but they are all very enjoyable (putting it mildly) so you won't mind the side trips.

One particularly pleasing is a sweet little romance between a very old, sick ghost riding on the Orient Express en route to England and its Gothic climes and an aging nurse who is having serious doubts about her life choices. It turns out that the journey proves to be much more of an ordeal than the poor old spook bargained for and he is near expired when the nurse sees him move very, very slowly into the salon car and takes pity on him.

Will the nurse save him? Well, yes, of course she will since it's a romance, but I won't tell you how.

If you know Bradbury I am sure you have decided to buy this book after hearing the merest mention of it, but if by some bizarre chance you don't know of him I can't think of a more pleasant way for you to make his acquaintance.

And you should most certainly do so.

**Gahan Wilson**

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***The Devil Is Not Mocked and Other Warnings,*** *Manly Wade Wellman; Night Shade, CA; hardcover, 343 pp.; $35.00.*

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Wade Wellman? Prior to his death in 1986, Wellman had a fairly high profile in the fantasy field, based on his most famous character, Silver John, a guitar-slinging opponent of all things creepy and evil amidst the Deep South terrain where Wellman was a native. But Wellman was much more than a mild-mannered regionalist, as this collection—the second volume in an ongoing series of his assembled stories—will prove. Employing a strong, distinctive voice, Wellman could spin fresh twists on old bogeymen and inventively fashion entirely new supernatural dilemmas. His stories are sparse yet poetic, economical yet generous, optimistic yet hard-nosed, clear-eyed yet ambiguous. In short, Wellman was a master.

Editor John Pelan has here assembled over two dozen stories plucked from Wellman's entire 50 years of writing, and aside from a few transparent yet still enjoyable early outings, Wellman is at the top of his form in all of them. A miniseries about one Hal Stryker—who encounters a variety of evil entities—is just one thread in this homespun quilt. But I particularly enjoyed "Frogfather," about a batrachian god, and "The Ghastly Priest Doth Reign," in which a man inadvertently assumes a kingship no sane person would covet.

This volume, as with all Night Shade books, offers immense value for your entertainment dollar. Reach them at 560 Scott, #304, SF, CA 94117 or at <www.nightshadebooks.com>.

***The Crow: Hellbound,*** *A.A. Attanasio; HarperCollins, NY; trade paper; 237 pp.; $15.00.*

I read very little "franchise fiction." But when a favorite author of mine embarks on a tie-in novel, I'll eagerly pick it up. And the Attanasio name is a potent strange attractor in my personal physics.

Attanasio has recently completed a masterful revisionist quartet of fantasy novels about King Arthur. Before that, he turned out an awe-inspiring trilogy under the pen name of "Adam Lee." And his credits prior to that include a score of equally wonderful novels stretching all the way back to his debut, *Radix* (1981).

As for the series character known as the Crow, most readers will be familiar with either the original comics or the movie adaptations. This assumed familiarity allows Attanasio both to skip any tedious backstory and also to hang his individual tale on a sturdy, readymade mythological armature, which he nonetheless strengthens and extends even further.

The intriguing, deeply plumbed cast of characters in *Hellbound* includes both mortals and supernatural entities. In the first category, we have Billy Max and Amy Darien, two orphans recently turned 18 and hence cast from their institutional home and into the thorny embrace of the world. The bonds of love and affection they forged in the orphange seem strong enough to endure the changes. But the two are unaware of larger forces at work against them. Billy's employer is a mobster, "Big Steel" Fiarella, whose prime hired gun, Buster Watz, has conceived an irrational hatred against Billy. Then there's Nadja Crimco, a Satanist filmmaker, who also bears a murderous grudge against Billy and Amy.

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dangerous than the criminal one. Down in Hell, a demon named Dren wants to cast off his fallen gracelessness and rejoin his angelic brothers. He engineers an escape from Hell, but is pursued by two of his erstwhile comrades, Nergal the Flayer and Succoth the Burner. A third devil, Thartoc the Cruel, more powerful than the others, completes the hellish embassy on Earth, summoned up by Nadja for her own schemes.

Within the course of a single day—the novel's entire span—Billy and Amy will undergo the most horrid excruciations, bathing in a cauldron of purifying suffering. Dren's quest dovetails inextricably with theirs, and the whole Gordian Knot of complications is cut only by the sharp beak of the Crow, that avenger of sin and righter of wrongs.

Attanasio's prose, of course, exhibits all its usual superiorities. Never content with cliché, Attanasio literally breaks traditional sentences apart before reforging them to Damascene miracles of tensile invincibility. Consider this: "Dren fled across the night under the whispering stars. The pure geometry of buildings captured the horizon in a labyrinth, and the city lights were threads in his hands, leading him around corners, down alleys, over courtyards, ever deeper into his own bewilderment." Pure poetry, found in abundance on every page. Moreover, Attanasio follows up on his past yokings of the mystical and the scientific. In his quantum theology, the Fall from grace is equated with the Big Bang, and demons manipulate branching streams of the multiverse and harvest dark matter for their own obscure relief. This is a radical and refreshing reworking of old myths, just the kind of tinkering fantasy needs if it is not to go stale.

If all franchise books were as good as *Hellbound*, there'd be no distinction between them and the best of the rest of our field.

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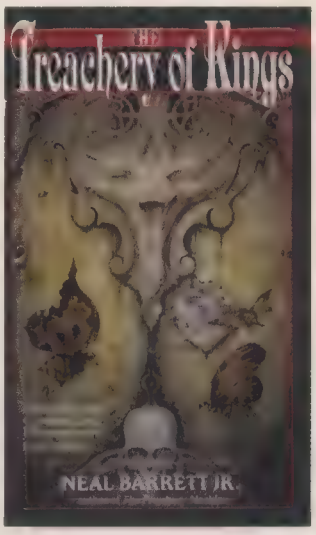
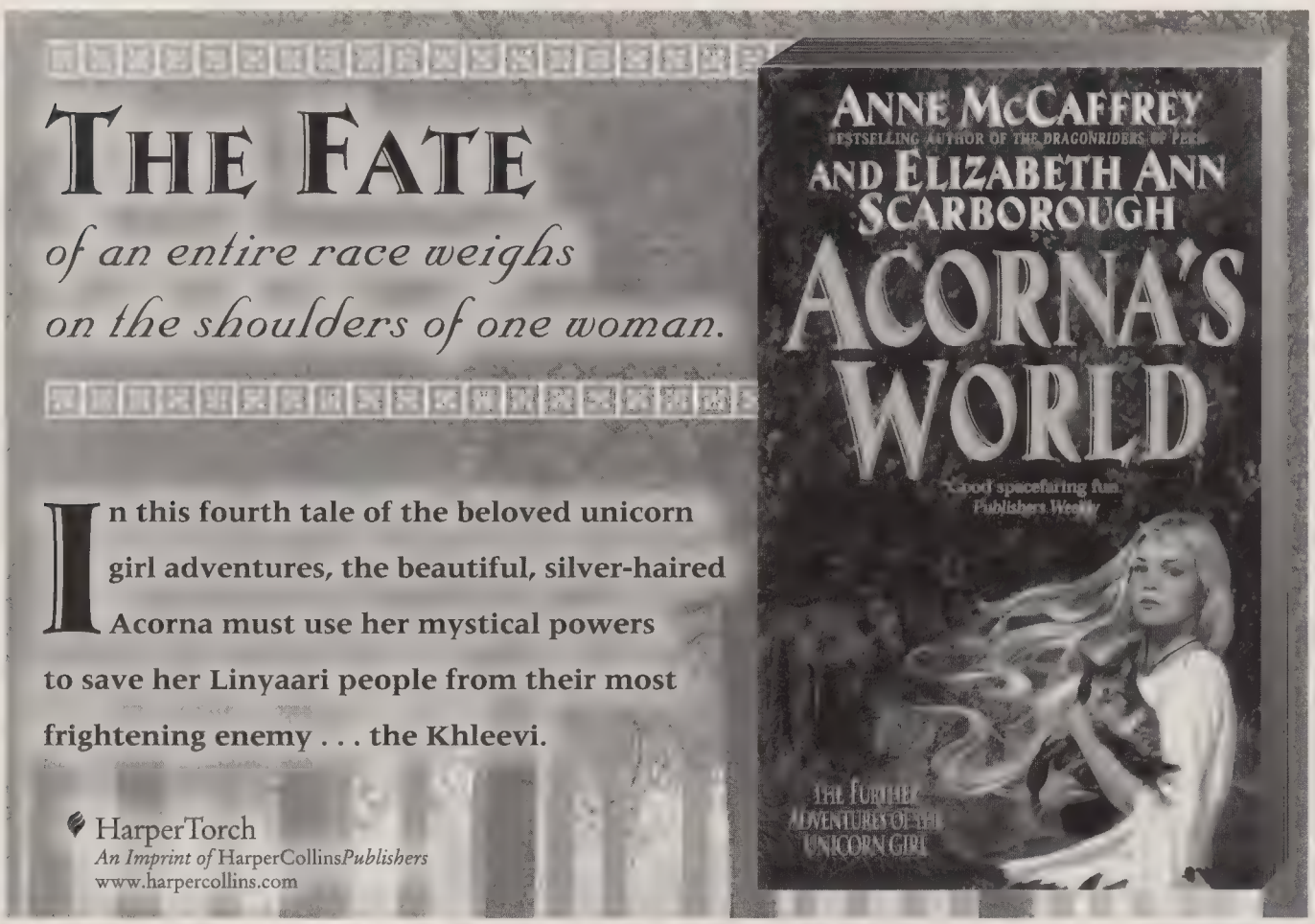
***The Treachery of Kings,*** *Neal Barrett; Bantam Spectra, NY; mass-market; 326 pp.; $6.50.*




In *The Prophecy Machine* (2000), the predecessor to Neal Barrett's newest, charmingly goofy novel, we met that irrepressible maker of lizardly automatons, Finn, his half-animal lover Letitia Louise, and their mechanical companion Julia Jessica Slagg, a wise-talking gear-stuffed reptile. This trio inhabited a world melded of magic and machinery, a world that might just be a postapocalyptic extension of ours. The eccentric humans shared their world with Newlies, nine new human- oid species created from animal forebears. (Letitia is a Mycer, descended from mouse lines.) The medieval world Finn inhabits is a dangerous, dank, and desperate one, full of insane religions and crazy kings, where security is purchased only at short-term lease and at a high price.

After surviving the Hatter and Hooter cults of the earlier book, Finn now finds himself a reluctant ambassador to the kingdom of Heldessia. Despite an ongoing war lasting seven hundred years to date, Finn's land of Fyxedia still maintains the occasional contact with its opponent, and now Finn is nominated to deliver a present he's fashioned—at the royal request of his own king—to Heldessia's monarch. But upon entering the foreign realm, Finn and his companions discover a bizarre religion at the heart of the kingdom, as well as a permanent revolution underway, all of which threatens life, limb, and their return to Fyxedia.

To specify that the luxurious present Finn carries is one of those Kitty Kat Klocks whose eyes shift and tail wags (except in the form of a lizard), and that the rebels, all dog-based Newlies, resemble Huckleberry Hound in their attire of straw boaters and bow ties, is to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THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF THE UNICORN GIRL

instantly convey that all this is played for laughs. And a fine assortment of chuckles we do enjoy. Barrett unleashes lots of off-kilter dialogue and is a dab hand at creating improbable situations for Finn to get mired in. A modicum of satire leavens the slapstick, with the brunt of Barrett's jibes being borne by the nutty state religion of Heldessia, which involves a lot of ceremonial naps in graveclothes. Additionally, Barrett's main characters—including the freshly introduced bullish Newlie, Bucerius—are such an endearing lot that rooting for them is no problem.

If you enjoy the work of Michael Shea or John Morressey, you need to visit Heldessia. Just watch out for the Gracious Dead.

---

***Similar Monsters,*** *Steve Savile; Cosmos, NJ; trade paper; 220 pp.; $12.00.*

Steve Savile strikes me as a very deliberate author, one who approaches material that might have a rich subconscious genesis with a later application of diligent craft. This estimate I derive from the thoughtful afterword to his first collection of horror, fantasy and science fiction, a compendium of 15 stories—five of them just seeing the light of day for the first time. As to the quality of his prose, there can be little doubt: Here we find some striking but awkward apprentice work, some stronger journeyman work, and a couple of mature gems, many of them set in his adopted hometown of Stockholm. All in all, a token of a fine future career.

Savile offers us mainly tales of personal redemption, whose wounded protagonists must deal with supernatural eruptions commensurate with their griefs. My favorite here was "The Fragrance of You," in which an artist connects with the daughter of a children's book author at the author's funeral, only to learn that the fables he once illustrated hold more than he imagined. And "Playground of the Broken Hearts," a cyberpunk excursion, serves to demarcate Savile's wide range of styles.

Get in touch with Cosmos Books at PO Box 301, Holicong, PA 18928, or at <www.wildside-press. com>.

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***Will World,*** *J.M. DeMatteis and Seth Fisher; DC Comics, NY; hardcover; 96 pp.; $24.95.*

Few graphic novels approach the density and complexity of prose works (although of course, no prose works offer the visual allure of graphic novels). But one such hybrid standout is *Will World*, scripted by J.M. DeMatteis and illustrated by Seth Fisher. This tale finds the Silver Age Green Lantern, Hal Jordan (now dead in the current DC continuity and fulfilling the role of the Specter) trapped early in his career in a surreal world that's a dystopia reminiscent of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985). Combining the gaudy oneiric logic of *Little Nemo* with the straight-faced absurdities of Lewis Carroll, this universe offers tons of eyekicks and intellectual stimulation on every page. Alternately as whimsical as the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* (1968) or as dark as the work of the French cartoonist Moebius, *Will World* sticks to your neurons.❧

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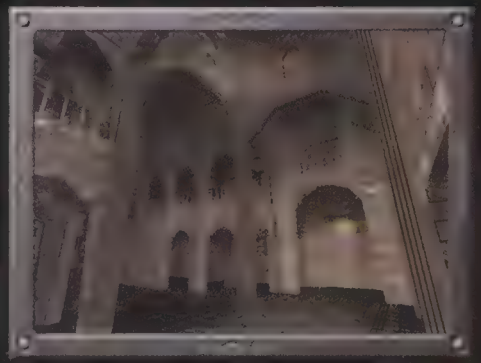

*Is vengeance a dish*
*best served cold, or warm ... like blood?*

# If on a Moonlit Night

The black Levi's were too tight, still. David could button and zip them up, but he knew better than to turn to look at himself in the mirror. He'd eaten rice and skipped suppers and worked out for a month getting ready for this night. He'd lost an inch around his waist, but it wasn't enough for the black Levi's. He had a 31-inch waist, not the 29 he'd had 11 months ago when he'd first met Greg.

The phone rang. David unbuttoned his pants and pulled them off without looking in the mirror. He'd decide what to wear after the phone call and a shower. He walked naked into the kitchen and picked up the phone. It was his sister, Susan. "Is the birthday boy there?" she asked.

"No," David said. "Greg's coming at eight." He looked at the clock. It was 6:30.

By M. Shayne Bell
Illustration by Lori Koefoed

SUN

"I thought you guys might be heading to the restaurant early, since later on . . . " She didn't finish.

"Eight's as soon as Greg wanted to meet. I'll control things till he's gone or asleep."

She laughed. "I'm not even trying to 'control things' tonight. But then, I'm not in love."

It was David's turn to laugh. Susan *was* between boyfriends, but that would not last long.

"So poor Greg had to work late?" she asked.

"Yes, but he's taking tomorrow off."

"Let me guess: Your house is spotless?"

"I've still got to dust."

"You washed the car on your lunch hour—right after the haircut?"

"The car gleams." He didn't tell her he'd taken the day off to get ready.

"You worked out for, let's see, an hour and a half?"

He'd spent two hours at the gym. He was just back from 30 minutes of ab work, 30 minutes on the treadmill, an hour lifting weights. David walked to the hall closet and took out a dust rag. The cordless phone hissed, but he wanted to finish cleaning and he wanted to keep talking to Susan. It helped him not feel nervous.

"Do you think he'll go to that much trouble when it's your birthday?" she asked.

David was dusting the piano when she asked that question. It was a good question. Greg had been distant for weeks, but David hoped he'd warm up again. He let himself imagine Greg packing a picnic and driving him up a canyon, windows down, bright sun.

*

David looked at himself in the mirror when he stepped out of the shower. He turned sideways and felt his stomach. He looked away quickly, bent over to finish drying his legs and feet. He hung the towel on the rack, then turned back to straighten it. It was seven o'clock. He had to get dressed.

He stood in his closet in front of his pants and started checking waist sizes again. He knew what they were, but he checked anyway. Greg had put on weight, too, but not as much. David didn't mind Greg's few extra pounds—big deal, he thought—but his own body embarrassed him now. Greg cracked jokes about David's stomach sometimes.

It didn't seem to matter how much David worked out. The protease inhibitor he had to take caused a side effect he hated more than the diarrhea: His doctor called it "weight redistribution." Everyone else called it fat. David looked forward to summer. He had faith in summer. He'd always lost the weight he'd gained during winter in the heat of July, August, September. But maybe tonight, after a few drinks, with the lights dimmed, after the nice evening he'd planned for Greg, it wouldn't matter that it was March.

David settled on a new pair of Levi's. He'd bought them on sale two weeks before. They had a 31-inch waist. He carried them into the bedroom, pulled on a pair of white Jockey briefs, then the Levi's. Tonight, after dinner, he wanted Greg to come up for champagne, coffee with Bailey's—anything, a beer on the floor by the heater. He wanted it to be one of those nights like they hadn't had since New Year's when maybe they were up to see the sunrise, when maybe they'd never slept.

David checked the roast on the plate in the sink. It had thawed. The blood oozing around it made his heart race. He put the roast in the fridge for later in case he wanted it instead of something else.

He walked to the front room and put a book of male nudes on the coffee table. It was new. Greg hadn't seen it. David had found it on a remainder table the week before. It could get things started. After he'd ironed his shirt, he put the book back in the bookcase. After he'd pulled on his boots and brushed his teeth, he put it back on the coffee table.

*

David took his evening DDI and hoped he wouldn't get diarrhea right away. He swallowed two Imodium pills, just in case. He had to control the diarrhea this night. Greg was HIV negative, and AIDS scared him. It scared David, too, but his medical signs were good, he felt better, there was reason to hope—reason to think that maybe a relationship could work now, that maybe he'd have time for one. People had claimed to love him before, but no one had stayed with him. They'd all thought he would die soon, and nobody had wanted to be with him then. Even so, David thought telling people he had AIDS was the easy part. Most people thought they'd heard all there was to hear about David after he'd told them that. If Greg warmed up, David would soon have to tell him the rest—but not tonight. He would not tell him tonight.

David's stomach felt as all right as it could. He hurried to wrap Greg's presents. He'd already had the red plaid shirt gift-wrapped in navy blue paper at the mall. He only had to wrap the Christopher Bram novel and tie a white ribbon around the bottle of champagne, which he put back in the fridge. He set the wrapped shirt and book next to the book of nudes. He debated Annie Lennox, Salsa, Chopin, finally put Brazilian guitar in the CD player.

Then he looked at himself in the hallway mirror. He made himself smile. He looked good, he thought.

*

Greg was late. David opened the sliding doors and walked onto the balcony. He leaned against the railing and watched his breath in the cold air. The street was bright in the moonlight of a full moon. David did not look at the moon. He looked up the street, waiting to call down to Greg after he'd parked.

After 10 minutes of waiting, he was too cold to stay outside any longer.

*

Greg arrived 45 minutes late. He'd asked for steak and beer and wanted to eat first, open presents later. The Salt City Jail steakhouse would not take reservations, but the wait wasn't long. The waiter took their order and walked back to the kitchen. Greg followed him with his eyes. "I think I've seen him," he said.

"We've eaten here before," David said.

"I mean at one of the bars—the Sun, I think."

The Sun was a private club for 20-somethings, and the 30-, 40-, and 50-somethings who hoped to find a young guy who'd go home with them. "I haven't been there in years," David said.

"I've been stopping there for a beer after work," Greg said.

David looked at the waiter when he brought them their salads and

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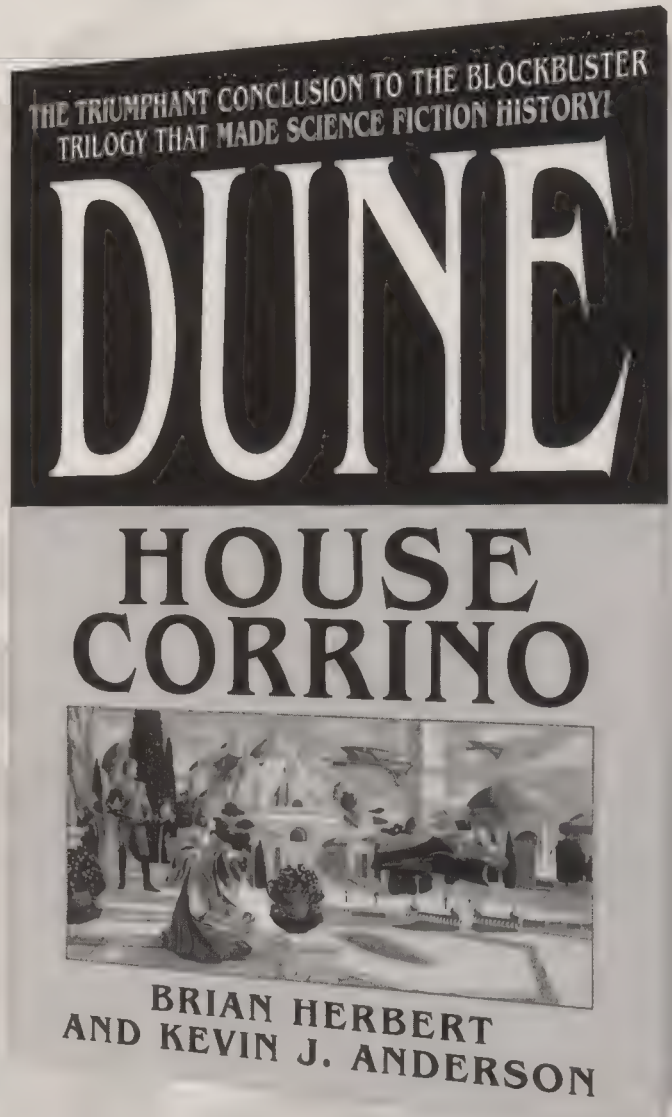
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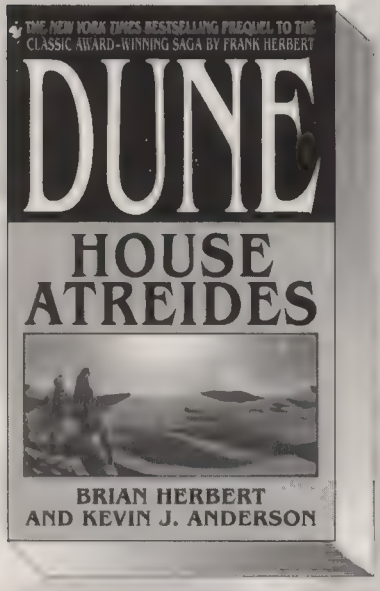
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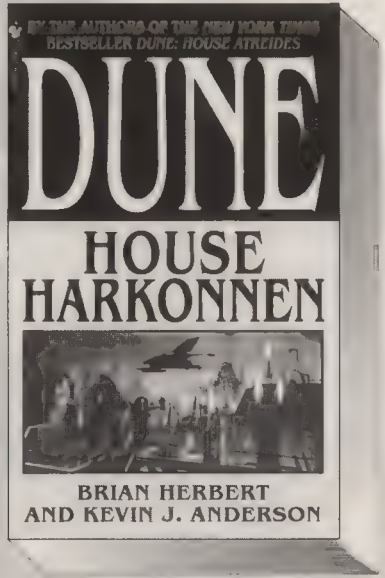
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SPECTRA

beers. He hadn't really noticed him before. The waiter's jeans were tight, his butt tight. David could smell Dial soap on the waiter's arm when he set the salad in front of him. After the steaks, the waiter brought a dessert tray to their table with samples of chocolate cake, carrot cake, apple pie, New York cheesecake with blueberry topping.

"Just coffee for me," Greg said.

"It's your birthday," David said. "You should have the chocolate cake."

"If it's your birthday, the cake's on the house," the waiter said. "I'll just have to see a driver's license to check the date."

Greg pulled out his wallet. "Here's my license," he said. "But give the cake to my friend."

"Just bring two coffees," David said.

*

It was snowing lightly when they left the restaurant. David drove them back to his apartment and parked the car. He hurried up the steps to unlock the door to the building, but Greg did not follow. He stood down on the side walk. "Thanks for a great evening," he said.

David stepped down one step, then stopped. "How about a drink?" he asked. He did not mention the presents. Greg knew they were there.

"I may get a drink on the way home, but I'm not staying out late. I'm tired."

David nodded.

"You look tired, too," Greg said. "Feeling all right?"

"I'm fine."

Greg nodded. He looked up the street at his car, then back at David. "You've been good to me," he said, and he smiled suddenly, waved goodbye.

David hurried inside, up the stairs to his apartment, unlocked the door, then locked it behind him. He turned on the hall light, then the kitchen light. He stood in the kitchen and listened to Greg's car start up and pull away, the sound magnified in the stillness of the falling snow. David walked to the coffee table and picked up Greg's presents. He carried them to the bedroom closet and put them on a shelf. He put the nudes in the bookcase.

He still had on his coat. He stood in the hallway and thought how he had dated so many men, how he had hoped so many times that something would come of it. Others had broken things off just as Greg had done: few words, not even really a goodbye; months of plans, time, and memories suddenly worth nothing. But David felt different this time. He decided that maybe tonight breaking up did not have to be so understated.

He walked to the front door, turning off the lights as he went. He walked down the stairs and onto the sidewalk. He liked walking in fresh snow in the city. He liked listening to snow crunch under his feet.

The Sun was where Greg would go for a drink, he thought. He walked toward it, west along North Temple. Maybe the waiter from the Salt City Jail would go there too, after he got off work. Even if he didn't, other young men would be lined up against the bar, or dancing, or waiting with a beer in their hands, backs against a wall, handsome. There would be plenty of young meat to attract Greg to the Sun.

David walked in the moonlight and let it start. It would have been different if Greg had not said goodbye. They'd have had fun, and the thawed roast would have satisfied David at some point in the night while Greg had slept. But Greg had picked tonight to break up. Too bad for him now, David thought.

David started shivering, and his hands and feet went numb for a time. He shivered again and again, but he knew that would end. He passed nothing open in the direction he was walking except a Dee's, and he did not go in there. He saw the lights of a Circle K on the next corner and decided to stop there to get warm. He stamped his feet on the mat outside the door. The clerk looked up when he walked in. David walked down one aisle with jumper cables and gasoline additives, overpriced shampoos and toothpaste.

He turned up the next. It had candy on both sides—licorice, lemon drops, candy bars. He picked up a Mars bar, carried it to the counter, and pulled a dollar bill out of his wallet. The clerk stared at David's hands. He put the change on the counter for David to pick up—he did not drop the coins onto David's palm. David carried the candy bar outside and put it in his coat pocket for later. He put his hands in his pants' pockets. His hands and feet were always the first things to change. David did not care that the clerk had seen his hands, but he kept them in his pockets now.

He took back streets. He shivered, then his body and head felt hot and numb, then he shivered again. One block from the Sun, he could no longer see. He stopped walking and just stood on the sidewalk in the moonlight for a time. Someone stepped in front of him. "Hey, buddy, could you sponsor me into the Sun?"

David shoved the man to the ground. He had not meant to push him that hard or to slash his chest. But after he did that he could see, suddenly, more clearly than he could see every night but one in the lunar cycle. The man lay in the mud and the snow, staring. He did not try to get up. David smelled the blood on what his fingers and nails had become, then he licked it off. He liked the smell and the taste, but he left the man on the ground.

He knew a place in trees by the highway embankment west of the Sun where there were seldom any people. He left his clothes folded and dry under an old pine. He waited in shadow till all the changes had finished, then he stood in the moonlight for a moment, just a moment, testing the wind, taking the chance that someone might see him and wonder. He enjoyed taking chances like that. It was a kind of exhibitionism most people thought he couldn't muster.

"Catch a human's scent, and if hunting it is what you want, instinct will teach you how."

He could not smell Greg on the wind, and he needed Greg's scent. He crept through the parking lot and found Greg's car. He had the scent then. It made his mind calm and focus in ways different from what he'd felt when he'd stalked deer or moose in the Watershed Protection Area above the city. His Aunt Alice had told him it would be like that. "Catch a human's scent," she'd said, "and if hunting it is what you want, instinct will teach you how." David had Greg's scent now, and he knew.

He waited on the roof of the Sun for Greg to come out. Greg could party for hours, maybe till closing. David could wait that long in the moonlight. The cold did not bother him now. He'd miss the night's dose of Crixivan, D4T, and 3TC, but he did not worry too much about missing one dose. It happened on nights like this.

He'd carried the Mars bar with him. He unwrapped it and made himself eat it. He dropped the empty wrapper onto the sidewalk below.

Chocolate was not what he wanted. ❧

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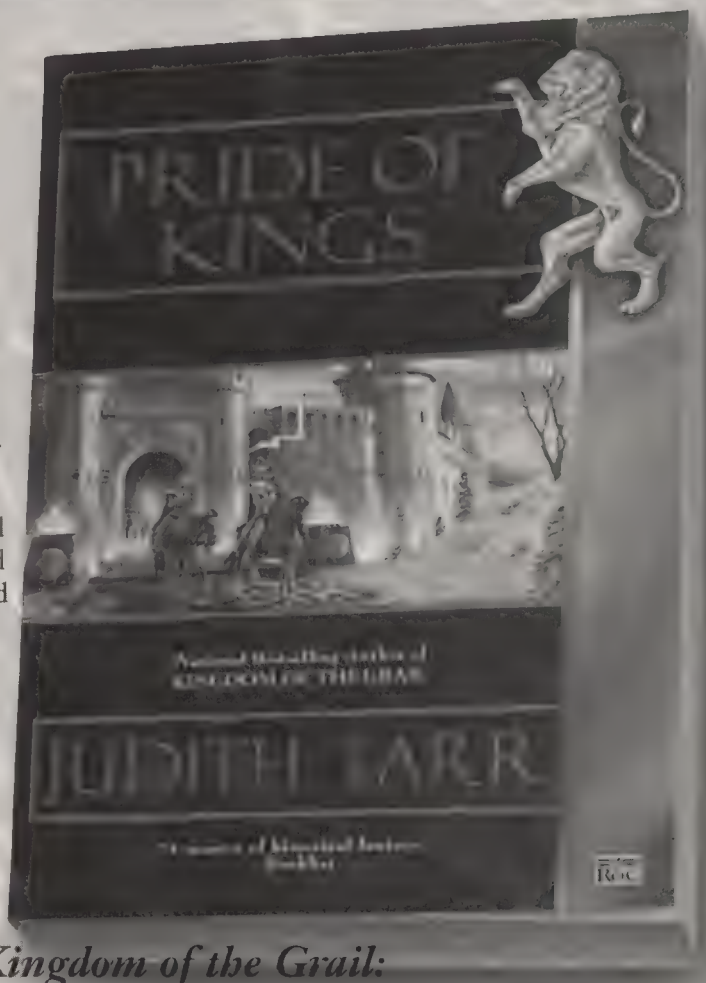


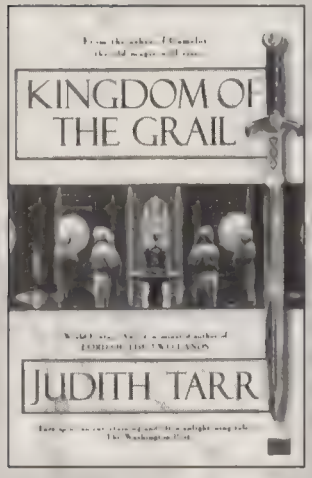


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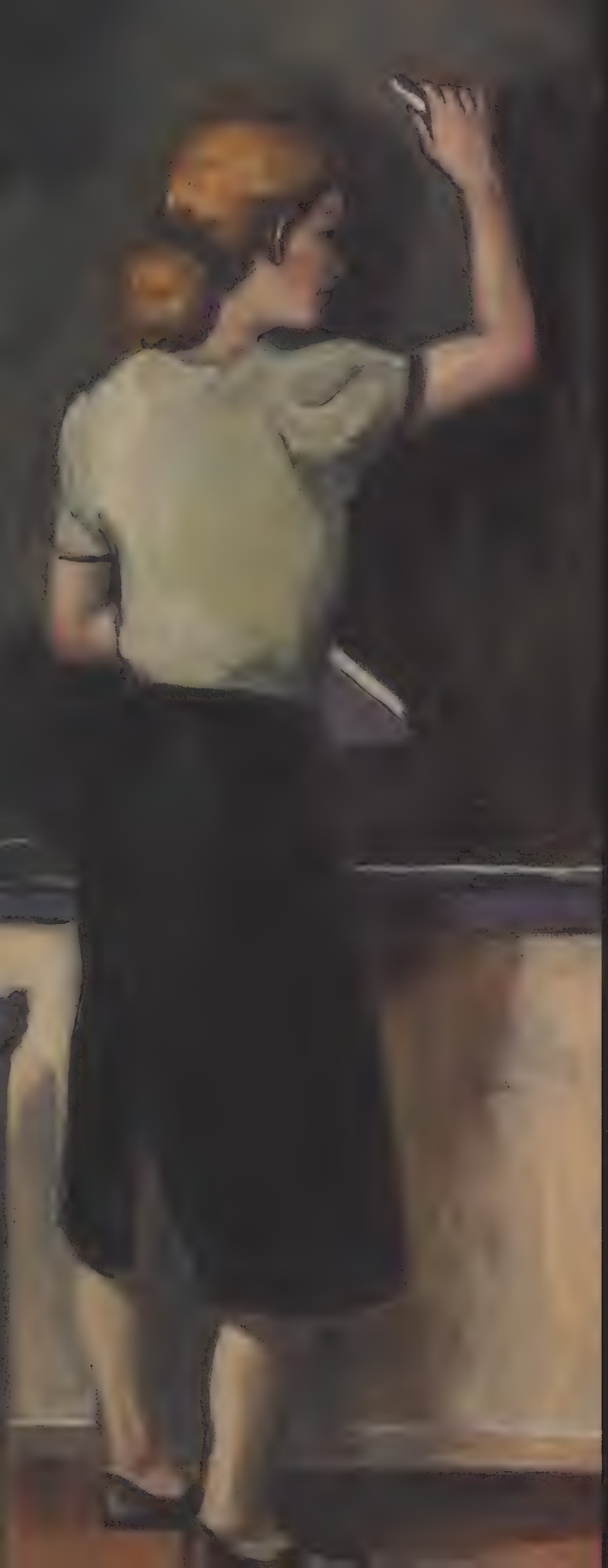

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never runs smoothly
it's not supposed to.

# as

By Daniel Abraham
Illustration by Paul Lee

# Sweet

I was in the middle of my lecture when the woman appeared, fading in like a cheap special effect at the back of the classroom. She stood there, arms akimbo, for a long moment. She was older than me by perhaps five years of hard living, ten years of watching her weight and hitting the gym. Her temples were touched with gray. She wore clothing that reminded me of the Italian peasant blouse Jules had bought me when he was in Rome three years before. "A very old-fashioned cut," he'd called it.

The kids looked up at me, more interested in my sudden silence than the words I'd been speaking. A couple looked to the back, but their gazes skated over her. She raised her eyebrows and motioned me on with one thick-fingered hand.

"Um," I said. "Well, let me show you what I mean. Everyone open your books to act one, scene two. Eric, you read Benvolio. David, you take Romeo."

The pages opened with the hiss and slick of new paper. One of the girls in the fourth row—Melissa Garcia, with her hair perpetually in her eyes and spiderwebs drawn on the back of her hands in black pen—sighed. They were already bored. The woman in the back of the room smiled. There was a sorrow in her eyes and a profound amusement.

"Start where Montague leaves," I said.

I'd chosen Eric and David because making them read was the only way to keep them from talking. They smirked and fidgeted. Eric began.

"Good morrow, cousin," he said, and it sounded almost natural. They pressed on, David stumbling over unfamiliar ground, getting lost so that he was reading one word after the next without trying to make them make sense. Eric's mouth found its way around the syllables in a way that approached playful. Eric was always closer to a Mercutio.

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The woman in the back listened while a halting, inarticulate Romeo lamented and my too-clever Benvolio subtly mocked me, my little fluorescent-lit, chalk-dusted classroom, and the world with the way he delivered his lines. I stood, pretending to listen, watching her features, trying to convince myself that I was hallucinating.

"Farewell," David said, "thou canst (he pronounced it can't-st) not teach me to forget."

"I'll pay that doctrine or else die in debt," Eric rejoined.

"OK," I said. "You all heard it. Now. Tell me what happened."

The kids were silent. Adolescent eyes searched out the corners of the floor and ceiling. I crossed my arms, not realizing right away that I was mirroring the woman, but then too self-conscious to undo the gesture.

"Come on," I said. "He's talking about a girl, right?"

"He's breaking up with someone," Miguel, thin-faced and dark-eyed, said.

"Right," I said. "That's exactly right. And who is he in love with? Come on, you all read the first act last night, didn't you? Is it Juliet?"

"No," Eric said. "He doesn't even meet Juliet yet."

"That's right. It's someone else. Her name's Rosaline, and she doesn't show up again. Can anyone tell me why Romeo's breaking up with her? Alice?"

"Because she doesn't want him," Alice grudged.

"Be more specific," I said.

Alice shrugged and looked away. I narrowed my eyes, as if I was judging whether to do something, to tell them some secret. It was the same thing I always did, a scene I had already played. I walked the four steps to my door and closed it, cutting us off from the hall, the school, the possibility of prying ears. When I stepped back up to the blackboard, I had their attention. Hers too.

"Then she hath sworn that she will still live chaste?" I recited from memory, then lowered my voice to answer for Romeo. "She hath, and in that sparing makes huge waste."

I paused, smiling a secretive, complicit smile, raising my eyebrows just a little.

"She won't put out," I said.

They blinked, they giggled, but they started really listening. They do every year. Every year they think that I'm too old, that I was born and raised before the discovery of sex, that Shakespeare is about the arid land of school. And every year I floor them. I haven't been caught at this yet.

"Maybe she'd sworn herself to be a nun," I said. "Maybe she just didn't want Romeo. Maybe she's waiting to get married."

"Maybe I got lucky," the woman in the back said softly, to me because no one else could hear her. Her voice was rich and soft as cream in coffee. "Or maybe some part of me knew he was trouble. Sometimes children are born wise."

I met her eyes and she cocked her head. I was quiet so long the kids got nervous.

The ballroom is filled with the finest of Verona, young flesh dancing itself to exhaustion and delight. It is part of a single movement, a single roving party that moves through the world from the first delighted squirming of an adolescent mammal to the shocking sexuality of a waltz, the drug-soaked artificial ecstasy of a warehouse rave. There is only one dance, reaching back forever, wearing out and wearing down the dancers, shifting from place to place like an invisible cat placing careful paws as it stalks through history.

He is there, his clean, clear skin, his brooding, romantic face. He isn't allowed, and he is there anyway, in the flicker of firelight and the smell of sweat and wine. His fellows, his gang, his homies, his vatos stand with him, all with an affected casual air. The way he holds his hips, the coltish awkwardness and power of his movement, mark him as one of a species of countless young men, a moment of manhood's arc caught in strobe.

From behind a low curtain, red-velvet soft against her fingertips, one girl watches him. She already knows what his lips taste like, she knows the feeling of his hand between her thighs. And she watches him watch the crowd, watches his eyes seeking, looking for someone, looking for her. And she sees it when he finds her, only it isn't her at all.

She shifts her gaze to follow his. The girl on the dance floor is beautiful, black hair in her wild eyes. When she laughs, the crash of it carries over the air like shards of glass striking pavement. When she dances, her hips shift more than the others, her hands caress the air more carefully. When she bounces up on her toes, arms high, her small, recent breasts threaten to crawl up out of her dress. She is 13.

Behind her curtain, the watcher shifts back to him. His face is shut, his attention focused to a single point which was once her own mouth and never will be again. His friends around him are looking more nervous by trying harder not to. They can feel that something has happened, even though they may not know what.

The watcher lets the curtain fall on the drama that has just passed her by, her fingers trembling. She regrets now that she stopped him, that he never filled her and never will. She weeps in the darkness to be left behind. Perhaps if she goes to him now, perhaps if she offers herself now, it might not be too late. But she doesn't.

And the old woman in the back of her mind, the one who was always there, will always be there, the one who was born with her, closes a pair of interior eyes and breathes relief.

Jules came home later than usual that night, held up at the office over some minor local area networking disaster. I was halfway through my dinner—a BLT, a little sliced fruit, a beer—when he started warming up a can's worth of Manhattan-style clam chowder. The wrapper of last night's frozen lasagna peeked shyly out the top

of the trash can until he smashed it down.

"So what news?" he asked, his back to me. His wide shoulders shifted, his bald spot shone in the unkind light. "Are they literate yet?"

"No, not yet," I said, completing our usual schtick. The humor drained out of the words two years ago, but we still said it. "And you?"

"More of the same," he said, still not looking at me.

Jules had been a prettier man when I'd met him. His age was starting to show, not only in the baldness that he had to call early instead of premature, but also in the width of his waist, the time it took him to shrug off colds and heal scrapes. My lover is a middle-aged man, I thought. And I'm six months older than he is. When did that happen?

"Actually," I said, "there was something strange."

Jules turned, still stirring his soup, to look at me. I leaned back, prepared myself, and told him the whole thing—the visitation, the woman's gnomic pronouncement, the way she'd vanished like waking up from a dream when the bell rang to end class. When I was finished, he was almost done with his bowl of soup, the scent of my bacon washed away by the disturbingly intimate and oceanic smell of hot seafood.

Jules shrugged.

"Weird things happen all the time," Jules said. "Did I tell you about the time I heard a ghost?"

"It was at your mother's house," I said. "Just after your dad's funeral."

"You see," he said, as if his old anecdote explained mine, as if I made sense when considered in relation to him.

"Well, if I'm going to be haunted by a character from a play, it could at least be one with a speaking part," I said, picking glib as the graceful way out.

We watched TV for a while, his arm around my shoulders with the casual feeling of habit, then I showered and he checked his e-mail. It was another perfectly normal, average night in my life. As the warm water slid over me, washing away some thin, sticky, ectoplasmic residue of the day, I wondered if Jules ever wanted out of the marriage, if he ever dreamed of packing a bag, throwing it in the back of the car, and heading out, half of our savings in his pocket, to find some new life, some cute waitress with a kink for balding network administrators. Which was the same as wondering if his fantasy life mirrored mine.

We met, Jules and I, when he'd been working for the school system. At 28, I had just ended a depressing, destructive relationship with a married man and was at low ebb. For three months, I'd been smiling wanly at nothing and looking through crowds, hoping to recognize a stranger. And then Jules had smiled and flirted with me, and I was his for the asking.

Not that he asked. Not right away. For two months, he would swing by the school to check on some hardware, or take off some virus that had struck the mechanisms dumb. He mentioned that he had never felt the urge to have kids. I confessed similar emotions. We'd flirt, smile, and I'd spend my evenings alone with a sick longing that I cherished because it was infinitely better than pain. I told myself that I was too late, that he was just flirting to be polite, that he couldn't possibly want someone like me—someone worn at the edges and old. I'd thought of myself as too old then, for Christ's sake, what was I thinking now?

When he did ask me out, it was a good dinner, half a bottle of decent wine, and into bed. We never even got to the movies. For three months, we fucked like teenagers. Each time he looked a little surprised and delighted, like I was an unexpected present. By the time my hormone haze faded, I liked him. It was almost two years after I first whispered I love you that I decided it was true. And that was six years ago.

I killed the water, stepped out of the shower. The image in the mirror didn't flatter me. The gym was changing my body, but slowly, and it made me look like a stronger middle-aged woman, not a younger one. The tone of my muscles was good, my legs still had their shape, but somewhere along the way, my skin had gone slack. My neck had wrinkles. There were veins on my calves.

If Jules left me, this was the body I'd be using to lure someone new into my life. This face, growing crow's feet and pale lips, would be my billboard: Love Me! I'm Not Dead Yet. If Jules left me, or if I left him.

I knew I wasn't unhappy, but I wasn't happy either. I missed the electric jazz of a first kiss—any first kiss. I hated the thought of going it alone again, but when I pictured Jules and told myself he was the last man I would ever love, I wondered whether lifting those weights, attacking the imaginary flights of stairs, wasn't something like a prayer.

Some children are born wise, the vision of Rosaline had said.

"Yeah?" I said to the woman in the mirror. "Well bully for them."

The rumors and whispers run fast as voles, shuttling back and forth through time, across stories. In the barber's shop with its scissors and razors and instruments of surgery. In the coffee houses with their strange-smelling smokes and Arabic poetry. On the campus of the university, in the letters from the battlefield, on the wind, anywhere the wind goes and as long as the air is moving. If some of the murmurs are about flesh long dead, it hardly matters. The shape of the tale is the same.

That dark-haired boy, he was outside her window last night. They were talking. I hear they're lovers.

It isn't true. I heard yesterday she's engaged to someone else. A guy in the army.

He got a tattoo of her name. I saw it.

There was a fight. Her cousin is in the hospital. Critical condition. The police …

It was drugs. They were all into drugs, all those kids.

She keeps liquor in her school locker. All kinds of it, in mason jars. She'll sell the combination for 20 bucks to anyone who promises to be discreet.

It's his family. His father's violent. Child protective services would have come in if the kids were a little younger.

Didn't you go out with him once? What's he like?

And on behalf of all the discarded first lovers in the history of the world, she raises her eyebrows, shrugs. She has very little to say on the matter. No one wants to hear how it pricks a little each time the question is asked. Her heart is not at issue.

Instead, she writes in her diary, sips milky tea, stays up late with her friends walking along the river and listening to bards sing of perfect love never attained, or captured and then lost. The memory of his mouth against hers fades slowly. His passion for her is forgotten by everyone until the ghost of it is hers alone, like a dream remembered but never retold.

She tells herself that it wouldn't matter if she did speak; her words would carry no more weight than the well-crafted lies falling from other lips. Truth forgives her nothing, grants her no weight or authority.

She tells herself it is not her story.

Eric, my too-clever Benvolio, sat glum and resentful beside his father while Mr. Makey, the vice-principal, outlined the problem. Fighting, cutting class, a little vandalism. Eric's father, Gary, listened with an expression that seemed a grim mirror of his son—the same sharp face, the same light eyes. The 20-year difference between them reminded me of pictures of a single man, across time. I could see what Eric would look like as he aged, or what Gary had been in high school, scowling as his own father had listened to a litany of his minor sins. They even moved their hands the same way.

"So you see," Makey said, "we're worried that his academic standing will slip, and …"

Gary glanced over at us, a Greek chorus of teachers, our lips pressed thin. I apologized with my eyes. It was clear how angry he was with Eric. And how hurt.

"Thank you," he said. His voice was musical and rough—a cello with a bad buzz. "You did the right thing. I'll take care of it from here."

"I wonder if there's anything we can do to help," Makey said. "We can arrange extra tutoring. And, well, I don't like to mention it, but we have counselors here if there's some trouble at home …"

Fucking vulture, I thought. Couldn't you at least wait until you were alone with them? And a flicker of amusement seemed to pass over Gary's face. I looked down.

"No, it's all right. I'll take it from here. But there is one thing you can do."

Makey leaned forward, frowning his listening thoughtfully frown. I thought I saw Gary suppress a smile. Makey's absurdity was lost on Eric, but his father and I shared an appreciation of it.

"If you teachers here could give me an idea of what exactly it is he's supposed to be doing. Straight to me, just so that it doesn't get lost on the way home by accident."

"I think we can do that," I said. Makey scowled, but the others nodded.

"Thank you," Gary said, to me.

There were pleasantries and meeting's-end handshakes all around, except for the condemned boy of course. Gary's hands were surprisingly rough. I wondered what he did during his days. Father and son left together, Eric's head bowed, Gary's hand on his son's neck like a man walking an escaped dog back to its pen.

"I wish he'd agreed to counseling," one of the chorus murmured.

"Is the mother around?" I asked. "It seems to go better when we can get the whole family together."

Makey raised an eyebrow, reading some ulterior motive into my question.

"She took off three years ago," the math teacher to my right said. "I had Eric's sister in my class that year."

"And there's a history of alcohol abuse in the family. It's that kind of tragedy that can rip a family apart," Makey said. "Ah well, we do what we can."

The after-school halls felt deserted. What voices there were fell to murmurs that still managed to echo. I unlocked my empty classroom, sat at my desk, pulled a stack of grammar quizzes in need of grading out from my satchel. I'd budgeted two hours to finish 60. An hour and a half in, I was just finishing the 28th. I put down my pen and rubbed my eyes with the heels of my palms until yellow and green ghosts blossomed.

Jules was home before I was, stretched out on the couch, his feet still in their shoes. A bottle of beer was sweating itself a puddle on the coffee table without the benefit of a coaster. On the television, Mr. Data cocked his head like a starling and said something naïve to Captain Picard.

"Hey, you," he said as I came in the room. "They literate yet?"

I didn't answer, just took myself upstairs and drew a hot bath. My skin was sweat-sticky when I pulled off my clothes, and the water felt like heaven. Closing my eyes, I could see Gary leaning against the desk, frowning, smiling, considering me with perfect pale eyes. I could feel the rough skin of his hand against mine. I wondered what his lips would feel like.

It was stupid. It was doomed. It was temporary; a good night's sleep and it would pass. I was too old for this shit anyway.

It was so soon. I hadn't thought it would come so soon.

It is summer, and she is walking alone. It isn't a wise thing for a woman to be alone, but the judicious abandonment of good sense is also a kind of wisdom. The day is bright and the tempers of the city's great houses are focused on each other, not on minor players like herself. So she walks through the market, trading a tiny silver coin for honey cake. It has rained earlier, and the streets still smell of water-slaked stone.

The city is Verona, and it is also New York. All the Alexandrias, all the Springfields, Santa Fe, Berlin, Kyoto, all touch corners of the city. Some contribute a sound or a scent or a building but most often only the invisible sense of the cosmopolis, the eternal city of which even Rome is only a shadow. And, as she walks to the river, the sun's warmth making her flesh feel heavy and pleasant and slow, she thinks of the boy she wanted once, in what seems like another life.

He is banished now, sent away to Mantua or Liverpool or Denver. Blood is on his hands, while her fingers are only a little sticky with honey. How easy it would have been to be sucked into that horror. Death and murder and tears followed him, and she might have too—followed him like any of his little plagues—if he had asked. And this perfect afternoon would have been spoiled by the pain of loving him. The thought leaves her bemused, like remembering an old illness but being unable to conjure the sensations of being sick. I had a fever, once, and it brought terrible dreams, but I've forgotten them all.

She takes herself down to the river where the booksellers have their stalls, rows and piles of uncut pages. She washes her hands in a fountain before buying a thin book of poems from a gray-haired man.

The stone quays by the waterside are full of people enjoying the touch of the sun, the sound of the water. A young man with crow-black hair sits at the water's edge, bent over a tablet of drawing paper, crayon in hand. An old woman calls out from the top of the bridge. Pigeons coo and strut, playing at being doves.

She sits on a wooden bench with just a touch of shade to it. The poems are printed with a pale ink, sonnets to love, and to food, and to the constant presentiment of death. Boats passing on the water, children laughing, nurses and mothers scolding, men arguing and boasting—all these things fade into a comforting, golden flow. She is hardly aware that she is being lulled to sleep until the artist approaches her.

"Excuse me," he says.

She blinks awake, shakes her head to clear it. The man is younger than she is, though by very little. His eyes are perfect black, so dark she cannot make out where the iris and pupil meet. He bows to her, just slightly.

"Excuse me," he repeats. "I did not wish to interrupt, but I wondered if, as you are here and by far the most deserving to be immortalized, I might be permitted to take your likeness?"

He is dressed in common clothes but his voice betrays his education. He has lovely teeth. She casts a glance at his paper, his fingertips tinted red and gray.

"You flatter, sir," she says. "I think you wish to draw me because I am stationary and convenient."

He blushes now.

"But," she sighs. "You may as well. I shall be staying here long enough for a sketch, I suppose."

"You honor me," he says. "Leonardo Urbino. Lately of Padua."

"Rosaline," she replies.

"Then I shall call you Rose," he says, nods, steps back a few paces, and sits down insolently in the middle of the walk, blocking the foot traffic.

There they sit for hours. He completes three sketches, and she reads her book through twice. When the church bells toll four o'clock, she stands. He takes her hand, kisses it, and presents her with one of the drawings.

"Thank you," she says, considering her own face, the shape of her eyes as seen through his. He has made her beautiful. She begins to say something, but fails, shakes her head.

"Thank you," she says again.

It was 4:30 on Thursday. I sat in my classroom, telling myself I wasn't stalling. There were just things I had to do, and if I did them here I wouldn't have to carry the papers home and back. The memo from Makey and the manila envelope I'd prepared were on my desk, on the corner, looking casual. My chair was unusually hard and uncomfortable. I kept fidgeting.

Fifteen more minutes, I told myself. Then I'd take the damn thing

up to the front office and leave. It wasn't the first time I'd made the resolution.

Gary showed up 10 minutes later, rapping gently on my door. His hair was combed back, a style his son imitated, and he held a handful of folders and envelopes. My heart ticked over into fight-or-flight.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm Eric's dad, and …"

"Gary," I said, standing, smoothing my skirt against my legs. "Come in. I'm sorry I didn't have this up to the front office yet. I was just heading out."

"Oh. No trouble," he said.

I picked up the envelope and handed it over, a little awkwardly. He had the opportunity to brush my hand, but he didn't.

"It isn't much," I said. "Grammar and a reading assignment."

"Well, with all of you giving him something, I'm sure he'll be plenty busy," Gary said. "I wanted to thank you for taking an interest in him. All of you. And for letting me know there's a problem."

"You're welcome," I said. Then, "How's he doing?"

"Still a little bit of fever, but he'll be fine. Just needs a little more rest. He's a strong kid."

I smiled. He smiled back. We held each other's eyes a half-beat too long.

"Um," I said, "I was just …"

I made a vague gesture toward my purse.

"Walk you to your car," he offered. My pulse stepped up its tempo. I thought I was blushing, but I couldn't be sure.

"That's very kind of you," I said.

I gathered my things, locked the door, and walked out, Gary beside me. Twice—once as we stepped close to each other passing through the main doors, and again when we reached my car—I caught the scent of his skin, sweat-salt and musk. He walked the way Eric did, only a half-beat slower and much more assured.

"Well," I said, opening my car door. "Tell Eric to get well soon for me."

"I'll do that," he said. His gaze flickered to my hand on the door frame, to my wedding ring, then back to me. Another too-long moment, then a wry expression—sorrow and amusement both—and he nodded.

"Be seeing you, then," he said.

"Bye."

I sat in my car, fiddling with the radio until my hands stopped shaking. I was being stupid. I was playing with fire. I felt giddy and light-headed and bone-deep delighted in a way I hadn't in years. All the way home I imagined other endings. Hey, I could have said, I was just going to go grab a cup of coffee … Or, Here's my phone number. In case Eric has any questions about the work.

Maybe I was flattering myself, but I had the feeling that if I'd pushed, if I'd wanted to, I could have spent the evening with slow, rough-skinned Gary, could have touched his hands again.

I could have broken Jules's heart. I could have been out right then, breaking poor, sweet Jules's heart. Jules who hadn't done anything wrong but not stay more exciting. It wasn't fair to him.

I wondered whether, if I tried, I could turn my back, decide through force of will to be a better wife. I didn't think I could. And even if I could, I wasn't sure that I wanted to. The rush was too lovely.

I had never seriously thought I had it in me, this kind of betrayal. The intimation that I did horrified me. And the delight and the horror didn't cancel each other out, they only sat beside each other in my mind while I drove.

He wasn't home when I got there.

She was.

She sat at my kitchen table, drinking coffee from one of my good blue mugs. When she looked up at me, her eyes were dark, her mouth strong. The lines in her face made her almost too expressive, like a stage actor whose makeup exaggerates so that every smile and frown can be seen from the back row.

"What do you teach them?" she asked, as if we were already in the middle of our conversation. "What do you teach about them, ah?"

I closed the door and sat down at the table. She rose, poured a mug of coffee, put it on the table in front of me with a clunk. I scalded my tongue sipping it.

"He was a crazy little boy, and she was a stupid girl in a time when it was very dangerous to be a stupid girl," she said. "And this is your love story? This?"

Rosaline made a disgusted face and brushed the air with her fingertips, shooing away a fly. I didn't know how to talk to a hallucination.

"Look," I said. "I've got a lot on my mind right now, and Shakespeare just isn't at the top of the list."

"Love, betrayal, passion, tragedy," she said, ticking off fingers as she did. "And you. You teach them this. Leonardo and I had four children. Passion? Yes, there was passion. He was beautiful. And then he wasn't as beautiful and there wasn't as much passion. But there was something else, something you don't teach. Something you can't teach, ah? We kept house together for 40 years. And they are the great lovers?"

"They're tragic," I said. "It makes a better play."

"If they had lived, they wouldn't have stayed together, you know. Five years, ten at most. Separate bedrooms. Separate houses. They make a better play this way? Dead? Fine, but the world is not a stage, my dear, no matter what anyone says. You are teaching lies."

Her voice was harsh, and my head felt like I'd packed it with cotton. I was tired of being hectored by visions. I looked out the window, hoping to see Jules drive up, hoping a real human presence would end this conversation.

*as she walks to the river, the warmth making her flesh feel heavy and pleasant and slow, she thinks of the boy she wanted once*

"Why do you want him home?" Rosaline demanded. "You want rid of him, don't you? All your daydreams about leaving, or having him leave. You want the hot and quick again. You want to be able to love whoever you love, and no guilt about Jules."

"Say I do. OK? Just say I do. Would that be so fucking wrong? Would wanting that feeling again make me such a god-awful person?"

"No. Only young. But, if it's so important to you, fine," she said with a sigh. "He's dead."

"What?"

"Jules," she said. "He's dead. He was going to a meeting. A linux users group, whatever that is. A man in a truck was arguing with his little girl and didn't see the stop sign. Jules died in an instant. The police will call you as soon as they get him to the hospital. An hour maybe. You're free."

I didn't know what to say. I blinked. And I knew, I knew in my bones, it was true.

"Congratulations," she said, disgust in her voice thick as a river of mud. And then she was gone, and I was alone with a kitchen and two coffee mugs. I started by washing the dishes. I didn't intend to, my hands just started doing it, and I let them. The house seemed unreal, attenuated.

Jules was dead.

I'd have to cancel our dinner reservations next week. The thought crossed my mind like a victim of a car wreck noticing that her purse is out on the pavement, that it has blood on it. So this was shock. How odd.

When I was able to feel anything again, it started in the back of

my throat, then spread down to my chest and stomach. It didn't feel like sorrow or loss. It felt like nausea. I even went to the bathroom and knelt in front of the toilet, cool porcelain against my palms.

Jules, with his thinning hair and his little pot belly and his way of merrily switching from opinion to opinion without bothering to think in between, was dead. The dangerous, thrilling thoughts of Gary seemed like a dream I'd had as a child. I could barely remember them now.

The pressure in my throat filled until I was sure I was going to retch, but what came out was a high, keening wail. I watched my weeping from a distance, like it was happening to someone else, like it was a storm.

Oh, I thought, this is going to be bad.

Then the sorrow reached up from my body and sucked my mind in. I didn't hear the car drive up, or the front door open. The first thing I knew was Jules, standing in the doorway of the bathroom. His eyes were wide, his mouth in a comical "o" of alarm. I pressed a teary, snotty palm to my mouth, dragged my hair out of my face.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You're alive," I said. It was the only thought I could manage.

"Ah," he said. Then, his brow furrowing. "Is that a problem?"

My laughter was no more rational or comforting than my tears. Oh, but it felt better.

She sits in the back during the funeral, only coming up at the end to view the bodies, to pay her last respects. Both families are weeping before the caskets. The boy's face has been tinted a little green by the poison. She tries to remember what those pale lips felt like on her neck, what the sound of his voice had been, soft whispers in a dark corner of the gardens that had turned her blood to wine. Could that really have been her with his scent on her skin?

The girl is paler. Her dress is black and formal, a tiara of silver shines from lustrous hair, and thin, string gloves web the backs of her hands. Death makes her look somehow triumphant. No mere poison for her. Who would have thought she had it in her? How did a little girl without the bravery to openly refuse her father muster courage to drive a blade into her own heart? What kind of love gives that strength and that self-hatred?

She wishes she could touch the cool flesh. Perhaps there might be some last communication, a recognition between two girls who have loved the same boy. Instead, she walks back down, past the clouds of expensive incense, past the two enemies weeping together, now that it is too late. The burial will take place on hallowed ground. There is too much gold in the purses of the front rows for these suicides to be thought of as sin. These children cannot be responsible. It is evil luck, mischance, an accident of the stars. Worse, it is something romantic, something noble.

Leonardo sits on the pew, waiting for her. His face is all concern. She sits beside him, her hand in its black lace glove seeking out his fingers. He holds her hand as if it is fragile. As if she is fragile. Sweet boy. She is the survivor.

The priest, himself all tears and woe, calls the congregation to kneel and pray for the souls of these poor dead children. She slips to her knees, but will not let go of Leonardo's hand. He tries once to pull away, to place palms together in prayer, but she will not let him and he stops trying. The low sound of weeping, like a summer brook, babbles distantly in the vaulted space of the cathedral.

Thank you, she thinks, projecting the thought out to God. Good Christ, thank you for my escape. And find it in your heart, Lord, to condemn the souls of the families who would ennoble these deaths and the poets who would tell this story as if it were about love.

"Are you well, sweet?" Leonardo whispers in her ear.

She considers, leans over.

"I am breathing," she says, resolutely, "and I am holding your hand."

I would have thought that the vision and her ugly trick would have stopped it. But two weeks later, I was still thinking about Gary, still recalling the half-sad smile in the parking lot. I caught myself talking to Eric more, as if being closer to him was a safe way to be closer to his father.

No, Rosaline's lies hadn't cured me, but they had changed the game. It was Sunday night, and Jules and I were at the house. I sat at the kitchen table, preparing exam questions on Huckleberry Finn and eating vanilla ice cream with Oreos. He was in the living room, sitting on the couch and working with a new computer. I could hear the staccato clicking of his fingers and the occasional fast tapping of his foot against the coffee table when he paused to think.

Oh well, I thought, putting down my pencil. Might as well get it over with.

He looked up when I walked in the room, his face interested but still distracted. I took in a deep breath.

"OK," I said, walking across to him. "So what happens if I fall in love with someone else?"

Jules blinked, ran a hand over his broad scalp, and seemed to deflate. I bit my lip. His eyebrows lifted and he sighed, turning off the monitor. I leaned against the mantle, half aware that I was mimicking Rosaline's posture.

"Ah," Jules said. "Is that what this has been about?"

"Sort of," I said. "No. Not really. I mean, I'm not seeing someone on the side. Nothing's happened. It's just …"

Jules crossed his arms, but it didn't make him seem angry. Only sad.

"You're bored with me?" he asked. "If you're bored with me —"

"No," I said, waving the comment away. "No, you're fine."

"Is it about having kids?"

"No. Jesus, no. It's not about you. It's just that I keep thinking that we're it. That you and I are the end of it. A few more decades of hanging out, watching TV, and trading gossip, and then death. I'm never going to have that mad fling down in Mexico with the dance instructor. I'm not going to stay up until 4 in the morning telling my life story to someone who's never heard it. I keep thinking I've had my last first kiss. And it's oppressive."

the priest, himself all tears and woe, calls the congregation to kneel and pray for the souls of these poor dead children

Jules looked at the ceiling. His expression was thoughtful now, careful, considering. I had thought he would cry, accuse, get pissed. That would probably have been my reaction, if he'd been the one asking the question. To him, it was another problem to consider, only different by the one small tear at the corner of his eye—hardly there before he wiped it away—and the tiny tremor of his hand. He was so beautiful in that moment, my middle-aged, balding, heartbroken, computer-geek husband, that I could have cried.

"Mid-life crisis?" he asked. "I mean, is that a fair shorthand description?"

I nodded slowly.

"Yes," I said. "That covers it."

"I don't guess getting a Lamborghini would help?" he asked hopefully. I laughed. We were silent for a long moment, the humor giving way to the depth and danger of the conversation we were actually having. I wished that the rest of my life could be in those

seconds—quiet and profound and humane despite the pain.

"I admit I kind of thought it was something like that," he said. "So. OK. What happens if you fall in love with someone else. Right. Well …"

"It's not that I don't love you," I said. "What we have is very important to me. You're very important to me. I'm not looking for a way out, I just …"

I ran out of words and had to make do with a gesture—my hands open to him, asking for help or forgiveness. Or permission.

"OK," Jules said, and visibly steeled himself. "Well, I'm going to have a problem if you fuck him."

I coughed out a laugh.

"I can't believe you just said that."

"Well, I would," he said, defensively. "And it extends to all kinds of sex. I think I'd react poorly to you necking with him too. But I understand where you're coming from. This happens all the time. I mean, I think every couple has to deal with this."

He shrugged and opened his arms, palms up.

"People seem to get through it, though. So I guess we can too. Can't we?"

"So it would be OK with you?" I asked.

"Oh no," he said, smiling and leaning forward. "No, sweetie. The idea scares the hell out of me. Makes me feel like I'm waiting for biopsy results. But what can I do? Tell you what you're allowed to feel? Like that would work."

"Would it help if I showered you with affection and promised you were the most important man in the world to me?"

"Wouldn't hurt," he said. "That and really, really, really, don't fuck him."

"OK," I said. "I can work with that."

He held out a hand to me and I took it, lowering myself into his lap. We sat there, his arms around my waist, mine around his shoulders.

"That's it then?" I said. "What about all the high drama?"

"Advantage of being grown-ups," he whispered. "Fewer hysterics. Feel better?"

I nodded.

"Good," he said.

"You?"

"Nope, still terrified," he said. I kissed the top of his head. His scalp was so warm. I lay my cheek against him and rested my head on his.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too," he said. "One other thing?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't die first."

It is summer, warm and fragrant. The apples on the tree are bright green and she knows that despite their beauty, they would still be sour and chalky. She kneels in her herb patch. She has kept this patch of ground—this house and its gardens—for 40 years. Time has thickened her just as it has made Leonardo thin. Her eyes are still good, though. Nothing broke Leonardo's heart like the clouding of his sight. He has not drawn a picture in two years.

Broad-leafed basil and lemon mint grow together in the small, stone-lined plot. Her fingers pluck out weeds, reaching just below the soil to pinch their roots as she pulls. The earth feels good to her, and today her knuckles do not ache. She plans to walk down to the village later and trade a few eggs from her chickens for a bottle of wine and bread for dinner. Her hair is tied back, graying now at the temples. The style looks severe. She tells herself she is an old woman and past vanity, but then she laughs. Age suits her, rather. It is as if she has finally grown into the woman she was at birth.

When the weeds are all on the pathway, their pale roots looking naked in the afternoon sun, she stands and brushes the dirt from her hands and knees. She gathers the dying plants, plucked untimely from their beds, and throws them in the rubbish heap. They remind her vaguely of something, but she doesn't pursue the thought. Centuries will come and go, she thinks. But there will always be weeds.

The house is on the south side of a low hill. Wind chimes play soft, mindless tunes. Far off, she hears the church bell toll the hour.

"Leon?" she calls as she steps into the cool of the front room. "Are you here?"

She sees him sitting at his favorite window. The old tortoise shell cat is in his lap. She smiles and turns to go, letting him sleep, then frowns, looks back. His face has become more interesting with age, but the flesh hangs slack now. She can see the nubs of his lower teeth. His eyes, his poor, milky eyes, are closed.

"Leon?" she asks again, her voice trembling. The cat jumps down.

She hangs her head, takes his cool hand in her own. The fingers are stiff. She nods to herself, and two thick tears drop from her eyes, then two more. She leans over and kisses his white hair.

"Goodbye, Leon," she says, her voice breaking. "You are a very good man. And I will always love you very much."

She pats his hand, wishing he could feel it. Perhaps she should have kissed him before she went out to the garden. She wishes she had. It is a silly thought.

"I will miss you, husband," she says.

She sits with the body for a time. The sun shifts, sliding across a fraction of the sky. The cat returns, rubs against her ankles to be petted. She sighs, stands, and dries her tear-streaked face with a dish towel. Then she sets out. The village is a fair walk for an old woman. She will need to fetch the priest.

The reception after the awards ceremony was well attended. The students spilled out onto the newly cut grass, bathing in the warm glow of sunset, while teachers and parents stayed mostly indoors or ventured out as far as the concrete steps. Jules was inside, in a deep discussion with one of the math teachers. I sat outside on a chair I'd pulled out from the office, shelling scarlet-dyed pistachios. I cracked one open and popped the nut into my mouth. A small pile of concave red shells nestled in a handkerchief on my lap. Gary leaned against the wall, his hands in his pockets.

We watched his son in a crowd of friends and fellow graduates, pretending that it wasn't a big deal, that the paper in his hand didn't mean anything, beaming despite himself.

"You did a good job," I said. "I didn't think he'd pull it out."

"He needed some discipline," Gary said. "He's the last of them. Three kids, and every one of them's going to college."

"You must be proud."

"Yeah. Well, they had good teachers."

We were silent. He looked inside, stepped away, and came back with a metal wastebasket. As he set it beside me, he pointed at my snack.

"Mind if I … ?"

I handed him a few pistachios. Our fingers touched, maybe more than they needed to. He cracked open a nut. I was better at it; he had to look at the shells. I considered his mouth. I will never kiss him, I thought. The idea didn't offend me, but it didn't sit perfectly still either. I tried again. I will not kiss him today. That felt solid.

I turned, looking along the side of the building. There, in an alcove where they thought they were hidden from view, Eric had his arms around Melissa Garcia.

"Looks like he's made a friend," Gary said, following my gaze.

"Looks like," I said.

"Bad time to get involved with someone, right before you head off to college," Gary said, something in his voice not quite disapproval.

"True," I said.

"It'll only end in tears."

I dropped a loud handful of shells into the wastebasket and rubbed my red-stained fingertips on my handkerchief.

"They all do, eventually," I said, softly.

Gary looked over at me, caught, perhaps, by the tone of my voice. I cracked a half-smile and shook my head. In the fading light, the boy leaned over and kissed the girl as gracefully as he could when they were both still new at it and awkward. ❧

*Innocence can be found in the most unlikely places—even in the souls of the damned.*

# THE INNOCENT AND THE PIPER

Her captors had told Doli again and again not to invite people into the beach house, but the night that Megan knocked on the front door, Doli was so wasted that she asked the woman in anyway. Megan thanked Doli by knocking her unconscious. By the time Megan shook the girl awake half an hour later, all of the humans who'd lived in the house were gone, and all the vampires who had fed on them were dead. Doli missed entering either of these categories because Megan wanted a phone and she couldn't find one by herself.

The problem with finding anything in the beach house was that its undead occupants had trashed it, the remains of one party heaped on top of debris from the ones before it, and all of it piled atop the broken furniture. Doli knew where to look, but between the drug and the blow to the face, it took her five minutes to find the phone and hand it to the woman. There was still blood on the hand that took the receiver, and more on Megan's jeans and shirt. Doli didn't think any of it was the woman's own, though. Without explanation or apology, Megan tied Doli up and dumped her in the bathtub before going back to the bedroom and sitting on the bed to make her call.

The call did not go well. Doli couldn't make out the words, but Megan talked for a few minutes in angry, curt tones. When the talking stopped, Megan appeared in the doorway. The woman looked very unhappy, and worse, she looked like she needed to share her misery.

BY ERIC T. BAKER
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID SEELEY

Without a word to Doli, Megan began to take off her clothes. Doli was still wearing her yellow bikini top and a pair of khaki shorts, both of which Megan left on the girl as she turned on the shower. Megan took her time about adjusting the water, letting it alternate between too warm and too cold as it fell on the bound girl. Megan seemed to relax and began to smile, listening to the girl's shrieks of protest and watching her trying to squirm out of the water's way. Eventually, Megan settled on a temperature she liked and climbed in.

The woman scrubbed herself for a time, getting all the blood off her hands and face while her mind was clearly elsewhere. Doli was beginning to hope she'd been forgotten when Megan grunted and picked up the bottle of tangerine-scented shampoo from the windowsill, then looked down at the wet, terrified girl between her feet. Megan squeezed some of the shampoo onto Doli's head, then tossed the bottle aside and began washing the mass of tangles that was the girl's sun-damaged hair.

"So, you got a name?" Megan asked. "I was just going to call you 'Lunch,' but now I'm thinking we should be friends.You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Doli nodded. She'd been quiet to this point, because she'd assumed she was dead. Now she felt tears form in her eyes even as hope formed in her heart.

## WHEN DOLI TOLD MEGAN HER NAME, SHE VOLUNTEERED THAT IT WAS NAVAJO FOR BLUEBIRD.

One of the old, original vampires had told her that the name was perfect; that she looked like a pretty bluebird. Megan laughed at her. "Only in California could you have a vampire junkie named Doli."

Out of the shower finally, Doli had gotten no farther than toweling herself off and putting on underwear when Megan dragged her to the kitchen. She forced the girl to eat some of the leftover pizza from the fridge. While Doli picked at it, Megan threw out the carton of spoiled milk and made Doli finish the carton that was still good. The kit was on the table and Doli, desperately wanting to still the fear in her stomach and chest, tried to cap the meal off with a syringe of the vampire drug. Megan snatched it from her hand. "They hooked you on this to make your blood taste the way they wanted, didn't they?" the woman asked, and Doli nodded. "Well I don't care what your blood tastes like. I want you looking like less of a famine victim. I want you to have the energy to obey me."

Outside, dawn was coming. The past few months had made Doli take an interest in the sun's rise and fall, and now Megan was casting glances toward the windows too. All the windows were covered, of course, done over in heavy curtains and tape, but Doli recognized the familiar nervousness in the woman. "Come on," Megan said, and led Doli back to the bathroom. She retied the girl's hands and feet and dumped her back in the bathtub.

"You don't have to leave me here," Doli said. "I can be good."

"Don't talk that way," Megan said. "You're not a baby." She flipped off the light. "Get some sleep."

"Please," Doli called. "I can't. You didn't let me take the medicine. I won't sleep without it." Doli lay in the tub, listening, but she heard nothing from the other room. She fought the urge to cry. Being without the medicine … hurt. It was going to be a long, painful day that—

Megan poked her head around the doorframe. "You're going to spend the day crying, aren't you?"

"I can't help it," Doli said.

"Fuck," Megan replied, flipped on the light, and came into the bathroom. She had the syringe from the box, and it was half full of the urine-colored liquid that was Doli's solace in her current life. With a deftness that showed some practice, Megan tied Doli's arm off and shot her up. She set the syringe on the sink. As she turned the light off again, the woman said, "Keep quiet. You bug me, you die."

Doli didn't bug her. She had lots of practice at being quiet.

## THE SOUNDS OF MEGAN ON THE PHONE AGAIN WOKE DOLI. "DAMN IT, ALEX, THEY OWE ME

and so do you. Can't you just stall them for—" she heard, and then, "Look, it isn't here. No. No, not even a library. Damn lying wannabes. No. I've got one more place to … Fuck. Alex, you know all I did for those cocksuckers and they can't—" Doli tried not to pay attention. It wasn't her business. What she wanted to know was if Megan was going to let her use the toilet soon.

From the bedroom there came a sound that might have been a phone hitting a wall very hard. A moment later, Megan appeared in the doorway. "Rise and shine," she told Doli. The girl looked blearily at her as Megan cut the ropes and lifted her to her feet. "We better brush your hair and find us some clothes. Big day today."

"I need the toilet," Doli replied.

The woman patted Doli's cheek with her cold hand. "'Course you do. You take care of all of that, then you come out. OK?"

"OK," Doli said, and she did. Dressing Doli was easy. Megan found her a pair of blue sweatpants and a Warriors jersey, a combination that made her look more like a girl and less like a victim. The woman had a harder time finding clothes for herself. There was a load of underwear in the dryer, so she took the chance that it was actually clean, but none of the house's former inhabitants had been exactly her size. She ended up wearing a pair of jeans that she had to belt and roll up, along with a man's pink dress shirt whose sleeves also had to be rolled up. "You look fine," Doli said when asked.

"I miss mirrors," Megan said, but she didn't change clothes.

The keys were in the red SUV with the heavily tinted windows and the surfboard racks. Megan and Doli worked for an hour, packing the back of the truck with clothes and a radio and an iron and anything they could find that worked and looked useful. Doli made sure that every ounce of the medicine got packed, then Megan made Doli drive. "Where are we going?" Doli asked.

"Just point us east," Megan said, and Doli did, putting them on the path for the interstate. They rode in silence until Megan pointed to a gas mart. "Let's fill this thing up and get some breakfast."

"I'm not hungry," Doli said. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been hungry.

"Did I say you were?"

"Well—"

"You're going to eat 'cause I say 'eat.' Right?"

"Yeah."

"Good girl," Megan said, giving the girl's bare shoulder a little squeeze. "You're going to do fine. Full serve. Full serve."

Clutching the money that Megan gave her, Doli went in the store to buy the food. Megan had made her leave the keys in the truck. Doli sensed this was some sort of test, to see if she would run. The girl knew there had been a time when she would have run; where she would have taken any chance to escape the nightmare she'd been pulled into. She knew that time had existed, but she had no memory of it, what it had felt like to be able to make choices like that. The attendant was sticking his head in the front window of the truck. Then he opened the back door, and Doli could see Megan sitting back there, her man's shirt unbuttoned, a bare line of flesh, interrupted only by her bra strap, running from her throat to her pants. The boy climbed into the back seat beside her and pulled the door shut. Doli paid for her food, knowing what she would find when she went docilely back to the truck. Even confronted with this casual murder, Doli didn't try to run. She'd seen worse, and she did not want to join the victims.

Because of her experience, Doli was surprised when Megan climbed out of the truck as Doli approached it. The woman pulled the boy out of the back seat and dumped him on the ground, then climbed behind the SUV's wheel. Doli saw the boy had the characteristic neck wound, but he appeared to still be breathing. Wide-eyed, she looked at Megan, who said, "Get your little ass in the truck." So she did.

They drove on toward the interstate with a much livelier Megan at the wheel and the truck full of the smell of Doli's hamburger. The girl had to be prompted at nearly every bite, but she finished it. "Stick with me," Megan told her. "I'll have you looking human in no time." Doli didn't smile. She just concentrated on chewing and wondering what was going to happen to her.

THE DRIVE TO BOSTON TOOK THREE DAYS. IT WOULD HAVE GONE FASTER, BUT MEGAN DIDN'T TRUST Doli to drive 12 hours straight the way she herself did. Doli would drive an hour or two, and then they'd stop. As soon as the sun went down, though, Doli would climb in the back and Megan would get behind the wheel. The woman would step on the gas and they would make some time while Doli slept. In the whole trip, they were only stopped once, and that at night. Since neither woman had a driver's license, Megan offered to let the trooper fuck Doli if he'd let them go. Instead they got a 10-minute lecture on the dangers of being runaways and turning tricks and driving too fast before the policeman sent them on their way.

Sometimes you catch more flies with sugar than with salt.

DURING THE LONG DRIVE, MEGAN TOLD DOLI ABOUT JUST HOW MANY ABANDONED BUILDINGS AND HOUSES there were in most cities. Usually a building would go vacant for some reason, and then the owners would lack the money or the interest in fixing it up and selling or renting it. Vampires, junkies, and all sorts of other street people would find these places. They had no electricity and no water, but they were warmer than sleeping on a grate.

When they got to Boston, Megan put Doli into a very cheap motel, and then went off on her own. She returned just before dawn. "Found the house, but there's a little gang of vampires living in it. We'll go kill them tonight." Doli nodded, but her face was tight with fear. Megan laughed at her. "Don't worry." She reached and stroked her hand over Doli's hair. "All you have to do is donate some blood and sit in the truck. I'll do the rough part."

The girl kept her head down, ready for whatever came next, but she managed to ask, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why kill … the other…." That was as much as Doli could say. It was enough for Megan.

"I don't like vampires. Never have. Which makes my circumstances ironic, don't you think?" Doli just nodded, and Megan went to bed.

Doli spent the whole day a jittery mess. She stayed quiet, but she couldn't sleep. For one thing, Megan kept cutting back her medicine. Plus, what was going to happen to her if Megan got killed taking on those other vampires?

As it turned out, the hard part of removing the vampires for Megan was getting invited into the townhouse. She watched from inside the SUV with Doli until the youngest vampire had been left alone, near the front door, and then she'd pounded on the door, her coat torn and her shirt open, Doli's blood smeared on her face and neck. The creature didn't have the experience to wonder why she was knocking on this door, and it couldn't resist a mixture of distress and blood. It yanked Megan inside. Instantly, the woman straightened and pulled the .357 Colt revolver from its holster in the small of her back. Megan kicked the door closed, and after that, all Doli heard were muffled shots and all she saw were bodies flying past the windows.

Megan and Doli spent the rest of the night cleaning out the bodies and straightening up the house. Megan seemed to take particular interest in the large library on the third floor of the townhouse, but they spent most of their time removing the personal effects and bones piled in the laundry room. Doli just kept her head down and carried the grim remains. She was past being shocked by how little a human life came to at its end, but she still didn't want hers to be over.

There was no sleep for Doli when daylight came. Megan gave her a wad of cash and sent her off to the various utility offices. It took Doli two days and a lot of stammered lies, but she got the water, lights, and gas paid up and turned back on. Even with the utilities on, the house wasn't cheerful or homey, but for whatever time she had left, Doli supposed it would do.

THE DAY AFTER SHE'D FIXED THE UTILITIES, DOLI APPEARED IN THE LIBRARY WHERE MEGAN was trying to make sense of the mess and the books, and asked what it was that Megan was looking for. The woman regarded the girl for a moment, then shrugged. "There's a legend, a rumor really, that there is a cure for vampirism. If it's true, it's probably here." She waved a hand to take in the whole of the ransacked room.

"Is that why those other vampires were here?"

"If it was, they didn't find it."

"I can help," Doli said, and it turned out that she could. In fact, she was better at it than Megan, who tended to get bored and who would start just flipping through, looking at the pictures in the old, cracked, and musty books. Doli, in contrast and particularly once she'd had her medicine, could read books for hours. She organized the reference books on one table and went frequently from the source book she was reading to the reference one she needed to understand it. By the end of the first week, Doli was doing most of the research, while Megan was spending her nights out. From some things the woman would say, Doli surmised that Megan had lived in Boston when she was younger and that she was spending her nights relearning her native city.

IT WAS A TUESDAY NIGHT WHEN DOLI FOUND HERSELF IN AN APOTHECARY IN LITTLE VIETNAM with Megan. Doli's medicine was running low, even though Megan had been steadily decreasing her dosage at the same time she'd been forcing the girl to eat more. The quiet little home they'd set up was going to come to a noisy, retching halt if Doli was forced to go cold turkey and Megan was forced to eat her to stop her complaining. From what Doli knew of the background of the vampires who had kidnapped her, Little Vietnam was the place to start.

The woman at the counter took some convincing, but eventually she brought out her father, who sniffed the sample, then put a few drops on his tongue. "Where did you get this?" he asked.

"Found it on the beach. Must have washed up," Megan said.

The old man looked her up and down. She shrugged. "Can you get me more?"

"Perhaps. If you can pay the price."

"I can pay," Megan said.

"This is not a bill that can be paid with money," the man said.

Megan tilted her head at the old man. It was the same shy, "come on" gesture she'd used on the attendant at the gas station, and probably lots of other victims before and since. "Just you," Megan asked, "or some for your old girl here too?"

"Fah," the old man said. "Even with all my art, I am too old to have made any use of your body even when it was alive. It certainly holds no attraction for me now." Before Megan could say anything, he held up his hand. "Be quiet and listen to what I, we, need." So Megan did.

It had started with a single Jiangshi, a kind of hopping vampire found in Asia. The creature had exploded out of an urn shipped all the way from Peking and had attacked three employees and the owner of the antiquities shop that had imported it.Within two days, the infection was threatening to overrun all of Little Vietnam. A Chinese sorcerer had appeared, offering to end the plague for a

million dollars. The community had agreed. In a single night, the man summoned all the Jiangshi to him and marched them into the harbor. The community was saved, or should have been.

"You tried to stiff him on the bill," Megan said. Apparently she'd read her fairy tales. "Where'd he put your children?" Just the boys, the old man said. The sorcerer's spell had held them all paralyzed as the boys marched out of their homes and away, even babes crawling from their cribs to go. The boys were in a warehouse, somewhere on the docks, waiting to be shipped south. Attempts to pay the bill, even at double the cost, had failed. "Police?" Megan asked.

The old man gave a bitter laugh. "You would have us go to the police with a tale of hopping vampires and magiked children?"

"You might be surprised what the police will believe," Megan said. The old man made no reply and for a full minute Megan stood there looking at the apothecary and his daughter, and thinking about it. Doli stood there too, breathing the incense, listening to her heart race. Why did Megan's answer matter to her? The drug? Probably.

"That's all you want?" Megan finally said. "I get your children, you give me a lifetime supply of that medicine?"

"It only keeps for about a month, but I will make you more whenever you ask for as long as you ask."

"You or your girl here."

"Yes."

"Fine. Give me the million dollars, and I'll get your kids."

"But the med—"

"I need the money to buy the kids."

"We've tried that. He won't sell to us."

"He's not selling to you. He's selling to me." Megan smiled at the old man, letting her fangs show. "Trust me. He'll sell."

## DOLI SPENT THE NIGHT IN THE APOTHECARY SHOP, BUT SHE DIDN'T SEE MUCH OF THE OLD MAN.

He was busy mixing and cooking in the back room. Doli napped and browsed and read and worried. News of the rescue attempt must have spread through the community because people began to gather on the street outside the store. Parents, sisters. They formed little knots and mimicked Doli's behavior, chatting, wondering, worrying.

With two hours to spare before daylight, a semi-truck turned off the main avenue and came lumbering down the now-crowded street. Doli and the apothecary and his daughter stepped out into the street as Megan brought the big truck to a halt with a hiss of air brakes. The woman opened the driver's door and looked at the assembled families. "What are you waiting for? They're in the back," she said. Megan swung to the pavement as there was a general surge to the back of the truck.

"Are you … OK?" Doli asked.

"Sure, kid," Megan said, smoothing the girl's hair back from her forehead. "He had a couple of demons looking after him, but once I put them down, he was ready to talk. He wanted to be sure I was more dangerous than the people he'd already sold to. From there it was just a matter of convincing him I wanted the kids as delicacies to feed to vampires."

"The children…?" the old man asked.

"I had to chew on one of the younger ones, but he'll live. They're all on the truck."

Indeed, at the back of the truck, moms and dads were grabbing up their kids and shouting, crying with joy over their return. Megan made a sour face at the spectacle and turned back to the old man. "I delivered my half. Hope you're not stupid enough to try to cheat me."

"No," the apothecary replied, and handed her a bottle. Megan handed it to Doli. Doli attacked the medicine with energy.

"Just a little," Megan warned. Doli frowned at her, but put much of the fluid back into the bottle. Then she shot the remainder into her vein. Mothers and fathers were coming up to Megan now, trying to thank her. She just waved her hand at them. "Make them stop," she told the old man, "or I'll eat one of them."

"As you say," the apothecary agreed, and shouted something to the crowd. There was a murmur, but people stopped coming close to Megan.

"How is it?" the woman asked Doli.

The girl couldn't keep the smile off her face. "Perfect. Better than any I've ever had."

"We're out of here," Megan said. "See you in a month," she added to the old man.

The apothecary turned to Megan from watching the children. There were tears standing in his eyes. He bowed to her, very formally. "Thank you. I am sorry I cannot end your curse as easily as you ended ours."

"Don't sweat it." Megan replied. "I tried being human. It didn't agree with me."

"Perhaps," the apothecary said, but he didn't smile. "Never to know children. That is a curse that transcends humanity."

Megan waved her hand again. "I've got a kid, somewhere. They tore her out of my belly even as I was dying. I don't know where she is and I don't care. If she was standing right here, you could keep her." The old man just bowed again. He clearly didn't believe her, but Megan didn't seem to care. "C'mon," she told Doli, and they left.

## WHEN THEY'D FIRST MOVED INTO THE TOWNHOUSE, MEGAN HAD FORCED DOLI TO SLEEP IN

the master bed with her. Doli didn't object to having Megan's dead body next to hers, and Megan liked having the human girl's warmth to snuggle against. Even when Doli got the utilities turned on and Megan got the heat going, they kept the same sleeping arrangement. And so it was that Doli was lying in the bed with the covers pulled up the morning after Megan had rescued the kids. The vampire came into the bedroom from the master bath, drying herself off from the shower. "Do you …" Doli began, making Megan look at her in surprise. "Do you remember when we were out on the highway? The cop stopped us?"

"Sure," Megan said.

"You said he could … fuck me." Doli had been addressing the ceiling, but now she raised her head to look at Megan. "Did you mean it? Would you have let him?"

"What? You a virgin or something?" Megan laughed at her.

I should have just kept quiet, Doli thought. She turned over on her shoulder and pulled the covers up even farther.

"Ah, Christ," Megan said, and Doli felt her sit down on the bed. Felt the woman put a hand on her shoulder. "Of course I wouldn't have let him. Don't you ever watch Fox? They've got those chase cameras now. If he was going to fuck you, he'd have had to turn the camera off. Then I'd've killed him."

Doli peaked her head out of the covers. "Really?"

"Really. Shit." Megan reached and brushed the hair off the girl's forehead. "You're mine." Doli gave a little nod and Megan got up. She tossed her towel on the bathroom floor and then came around to climb into the bed.

"Do you really have a daughter?" Doli asked.

"I really do."

"And you don't know where she is?"

"I've never even seen her. They delivered her while I was in a coma."

"Oh."

Megan rolled up on her elbow and looked at the girl. "What's up with you?"

"I found it." Doli turned her head back to meet Megan's eyes. "In one of the books. The ritual." Megan's mouth opened in shock. Maybe she'd never expected the ritual to be found. Doli hadn't. She rolled onto her back and looked up at the vampire. "It isn't what you think, though. You're dead. There's nothing that can bring you back."

"Then what—?"

"You're also damned. You have to keep this undead life or you go straight to hell."

"Yeah," Megan said. She smiled. "Yeah. I'd heard that."

"The ritual I found. It will purify your soul. Lift your damnation. You have to wait for an All Saints day, and then you have to find an innocent to spend the entire night praying over your remains. It hurts. And the innocent has to keep going. All night. If she makes it, your soul is clean." Doli felt tears welling in her eyes. Megan reached out a cold hand and stroked the girl's forehead. Doli didn't flinch, just lay passively, waiting.

"When is the next All Saints day?"

"Tomorrow."

"I see," Megan said. The woman's gaze unfocused, as if she were looking at something very far away. Again, Doli waited, her quiet breathing audible above the noise of the street outside. Eventually, Megan bent and pressed her cold lips to the forehead she'd laid bare. "Too bad we don't know any innocents."

"I can do it," Doli said. Megan's eyebrows rose in frank disbelief, and Doli felt the hot blood of a blush rising into her face. "I can. I fit the definition."

The vampire snorted and started to get up. Catching herself, she looked back at Doli. "You'd do it, wouldn't you?" Megan asked. Doli nodded. Megan sighed. "So what's the rest of it?"

"At the end of the vigil, your soul is pure, but you're still a vampire, still dead," Doli said, and more tears welled out of her eyes and ran down her cheeks. "You can continue to walk the earth as a vampire, but if you ever taste human blood again after the ritual, your soul is again damned, irrevocably."

"So it's best if I'm put down right after the ritual?" Megan was smiling. "Best if someone kills me? So I'm not tempted?" Doli nodded. "And you couldn't kill me?" Doli shook her head. "Why not?"

It's not a fair question, Doli thought. If Megan didn't know already … couldn't see the answer in her eyes.… "You're not like the others," Doli said. "You helped those kids."

"Memories," Megan said. "I can remember what it was like to care. To help. I don't anymore. Care. Most days it is all I can do not to just eat you. But I remember who I was, and every day I don't go postal is another day I'm sticking it in the eye of the creature that did this to me. I like that. I like that more than the taste of blood. Most days." She smiled at Doli. "So you won't kill me, and I bet if I do it myself, that would be suicide. Which also damns me."

Doli nodded. "I'm sorry," she said. Meaning it.

"Yeah," Megan said. She brushed a tear from the girl's cheek and lay down beside her. "It's a pretty fucked world."

The morning light was pressing on the room's curtains. Doli could feel Megan's already-cold body getting colder and stiller. Under the covers, Doli reached over and took Megan's hand. It was close, but Doli was sure that Megan squeezed it just before she went completely cold.

## IT WAS LATER IN THE DAY. THE SUN WOULD SET SOON. DOLI WAS SITTING IN THE LIVING ROOM.

She was on the couch, her feet drawn up to her butt and her arms wrapped around her legs. She was staring at the syringe full of her medicine that was sitting on the coffee table before her. She was trying to imagine that she was a vampire and the syringe was blood. I can do without it, she was thinking, over and over. It's just a little pain. A little. Megan could do it easily. She could.

How long the man had been standing in the entryway, Doli had no idea. She just looked up, and there he was. He was wearing a sports coat. And a collared shirt. And he had a gun in his right hand, which was pointed at her. His left hand was up, and his left index finger was pressed to his lips. Doli didn't scream.

"Where is she?" he asked, softly.

"Upstairs," Doli said. "You're her husband, aren't you?"

"I'm the father of her child. We never had a chance to get married." He took a step backward.

"Wait," Doli said. She stood up, slowly, watching the gun. "Please. Give her one more night. Please." The man opened his mouth. "Please," Doli said again. "Come back in the morning."

"What if she kills tonight?" The man asked. "What if she runs?"

"I won't tell her," Doli promised.

The man looked at her, tilting his head and frowning. "Yes," he said. "Yes, you will, but you don't think she'll run when she finds out. Why?"

Doli told him.

## "DAWN," MEGAN SAID IN A VOICE GONE RAW FROM ALL THE SCREAMING SHE HAD DONE.

Doli just nodded. She had sobbed until no more tears would come, and she had prayed until her own voice was gone, and then prayed some more. Megan rattled the chains that held her to the basement wall. "Like pounding my head against a rock. Feels so good now that it has stopped."

"Do you.…" Doli tried, but that was as far as she could go.

"I want to suck you dry," Megan answered. "Sorry. My soul may be pure, but I want to bathe in your blood and then drink it all. And then I want to eat you for the second course, Alex."

"Hello, Megan," the man said. He was wearing the same clothes and carrying the same gun from the day before as he came down the stairs. Doli wondered if he'd spent the whole night sitting outside the house, watching. Listening.

"Do me a favor, my love."

"I'm past owing you anything."

"Watch out for this girl." Megan smiled at Doli. "She's tougher than she looks, but she needs someone to remind her to eat."

"I'll see she's cared for," the man said. He wasn't moving from the bottom step. Doli realized that he wanted the whole basement between him and Megan. In case.

"Don't just dump her on social work," Megan said. The woman sounded like a gravel road. "Care for her. You may not owe me, but you damn well owe her."

Doli looked back at the man, and he met her eyes. Just for a moment. "All right," he said.

"Good," Megan agreed, and the basement filled with horrible, explosive sounds. Doli threw herself to the floor as the noise and smoke and light filled the basement.

And then it stopped.

Doli looked up, cautiously. Alex was standing beside a pile of brass casings, the gun held limply at his side. His eyes were hooded and he looked about a hundred years old. Still cautiously, Doli got to her feet. Alex held out his other hand to her. Doli shook her head and walked past him, up the stairs, being careful not to look back.

The stairs led to the entryway where the front door was ajar. In the doorway to the living room, a bag with Doli's few possessions sat on the hardwood of the floor. On the coffee table in the living room was the medicine kit and the bottle of the drug. Doli walked past them all to get a ginger ale out of the fridge. She drank it all, then came back to the entryway. Alex was there, waiting for her. Doli stopped beside the bag and turned toward the bottle. Without looking at the man, she asked, "What's your daughter's name?"

"Kate," Alex said. Doli could just hear him over the ringing in her ears.

"How old is she?"

"Two years next week."

"Can I meet her?"

"Of course," Alex said. There was a pause. Doli was trying to take her eyes off the medicine. "That bag all you need?" the man finally asked. Doli glanced down. She took a deep breath, picked up the bag, and squared her shoulders. Turned to Alex.

"Yes," Doli said. "This is all." ❧

*When you read a Gene Wolfe story, you may like some of it, and not like other parts of it. But your faith will always be rewarded.*

# Queen

By Gene Wolfe
Illustration by Mahendra Singh

It was late afternoon when the travelers reached the village. The taller of the two led the way to the well, and they sat there to wait as travelers do who hope that someone will offer them a roof for the night. As it chanced the richest man in the village hurried by, then stopped, compelled by something he glimpsed in their faces. Something he could not have explained.

"I'll be back this way quite soon," he told them. "We [illegible]"

The taller thanked him. "We were only hoping for directions. What is the name of your village?"

The richest man told him.

"We have come to the right place, then."

He named the old woman.

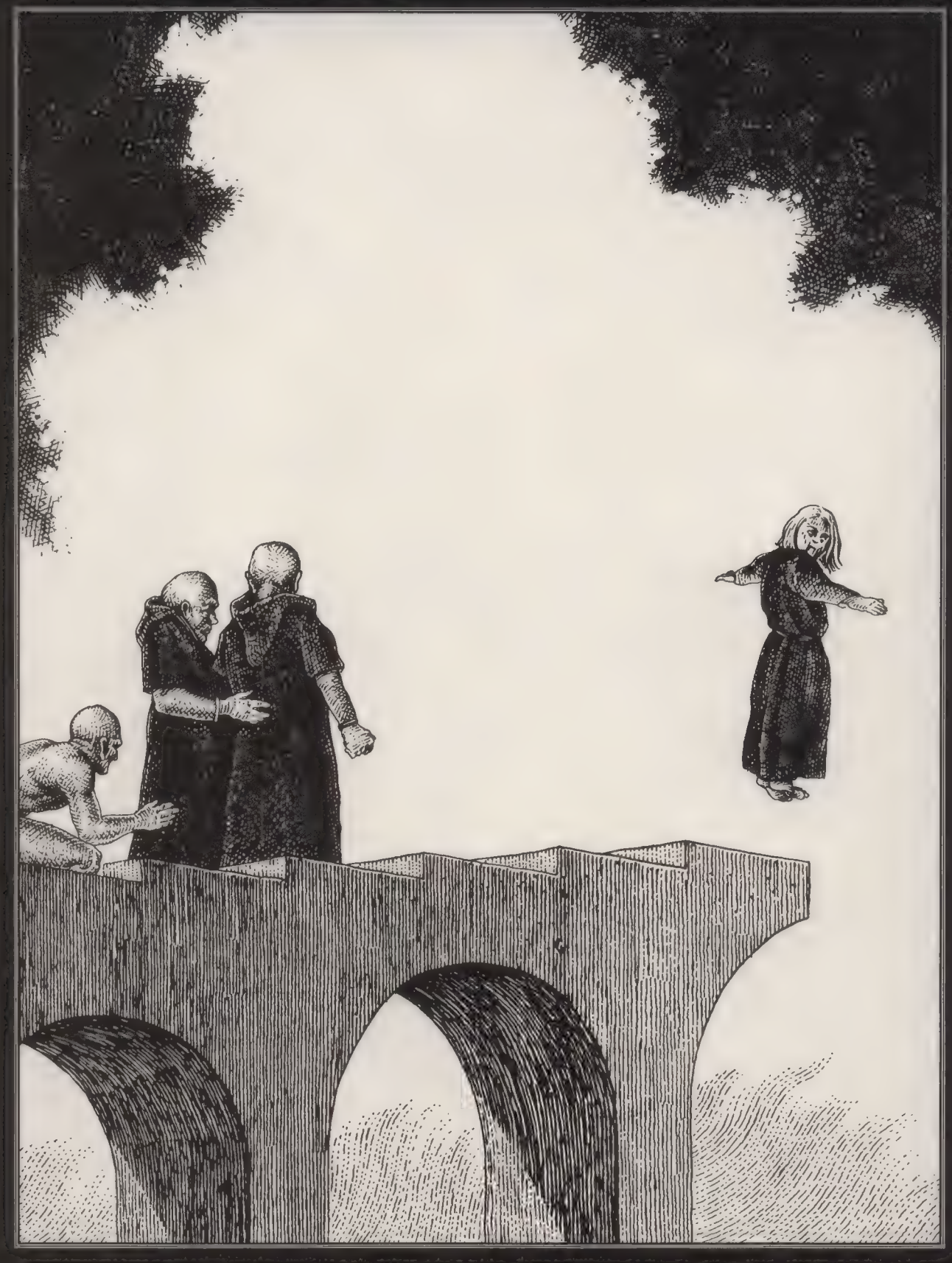
"She's poor," the richest man said.

They said nothing; it was as though they had not heard.

"She hasn't a lot. Are you relatives? Maybe you could buy something and take it to her, then she could cook it for you. A lamb."

"Where does she live?" the taller asked.

"Over there." The richest man pointed. "At the edge of the village." He hesitated. "Come with me. I'll show you."



They followed him, walking side by side so silently that he looked behind him thinking they might have gone. Neither had a staff. That seemed strange; he tried to recall when he had last seen a traveler who had no staff to help him walk, no staff to defend his life, if defense of life were needed.

The old woman was still at her spinning, which surprised him. She let them in and invited them to sit. The travelers did, but he did not, saying, "There are things I have to do. I only brought them here because they didn't know the way, didn't know how to find your house. Are they relations of yours?"

She shook her head.

"Do you know them? It might not be safe."

She considered, her head to one side, remembering. "I think I know that one. Or perhaps not. It's been so long."

"You're not going to hurt her, I hope?" the richest man asked. "She has nothing."

Speaking for the first time, the smaller of the two said, "We have come to take her to the coronation."

"Well." The richest man cleared his throat. "She is a, er, um, descendant of the royal line. I had forgotten. However …"

"However?"

He coughed. "However, a great many people are, and she has little with which to make you welcome."

"A little oil," the old woman said. "Some flour."

"So why don't I, ah, provide a bit of food? I could have my servants bring something, and dine with you myself." Suddenly unsure, he looked at the old woman. "Would that be all right?"

"I would like it," the old woman assured him.

When his servants had spread a cloth for them and loaded her small table with dishes, he dismissed them and sat down.

"I don't know that all this is good," he said. "Likely some of it won't be. But some of it's bound to be good."

"Do you want to go now?" the smaller traveler asked the old woman. "Or would you rather eat first? It's up to you."

She smiled. "Is it a long way?"

The taller said, "Very long indeed. The place is very far from here."

"Then I would like to eat first." She prayed over the food the richest man had provided, and as he listened to her it came to him that he had never heard such prayers before, and then that he had never heard prayer at all. He was like a man who had seen only bad coin all his life, he thought, and after a great many years receives a purse of real silver, fresh from the mint.

"That is true," the taller said when the old woman had finished her prayer, "but food is good, too." It seemed to the richest man that this had been said in answer to his thought, though he could not be sure.

"I was about to say that I never expected to go to a coronation," the old woman told the smaller, smiling, "but now that I think about it, I realize it isn't really true. I used to dream that I'd see my son's coronation—that my son would be a king, and someday I would see him crowned. It was silly of me."

"Her son was a teacher," the richest man explained.

They ate olives, bread, and mutton and drank wine.

"You won't be leaving in the morning, I hope?" The richest man had discovered that he did not want them to go; he would suggest they sleep in his house, as he had first proposed. They could rejoin the old woman in the morning.

"No," the taller said.

"That's good. You must be tired, since you've come a long way. You really ought to stay here for a fortnight or more recruiting your strength. This is an interesting part of the country, agriculturally and historically. I can show you around and introduce you to all the people you ought to meet. Believe me, it never hurts to be introduced, to have connections in various parts of the country. Too many people think that they can do everything through relatives, their families, and their wives' relations. It never works out."

No one spoke.

"I'll see to it that you're welcomed everywhere."

The old woman said, "If we're really going to go to a coronation …"

"I can find a donkey for you," the richest man told her, "and I will. You couldn't keep up with these two fellows for an hour. I'm sure you realize it, and they're going to have to realize it, too."

She was looking at the taller. "Weren't you the one who came to tell me about my son?"

He nodded.

"I knew I'd seen you somewhere. Yes, that was it. You don't look a day older."

The richest man coughed apologetically. "You're not relatives of hers, I take it."

"No," the taller said. "We're messengers."

"Well, you're welcome just the same. I hope you'll stay until the new moon, at least."

"We will leave when she has eaten as much as she wants," the smaller told him.

"Tonight?" It was insane. He thought the smaller might be joking.

"Oh, I've had all I want," the old woman said. "It doesn't take much to fill me up these days."

The taller said, "Then we should go."

"I want to thank you," the old woman told the richest man. "What you've done for me tonight was very kind. I'll always remember it."

He wished that it had been a great deal more, and tried to say he was sorry that he had never befriended her during all the years she had lived in the village, and that it would be otherwise in the future.

She looked at the taller when he said these things, and the taller nodded assent.

"You're a messenger," she said. "You said so. Just a messenger."

The taller nodded again. "A servant."

"Sent to get me." A shadow, as of fear, crossed her face. "You're not the messenger of death?"

"No," the taller told her. "I'm not."

"What about him?" She indicated the smaller.

"We should go now." The taller stood as he spoke.

The richest man felt that all three had forgotten him. More diffidently than he had intended, he asked whether he might go with them.

"To the coronation?" The taller shook his head. "You may not. It's by invitation only."

"Just to the edge of the village."

The taller smiled and nodded. "Since we are there now, yes, you may."

"You'll tell others," the smaller said when they were outside. "That's good. Because you're rich, they'll have to listen to you. But some won't believe you, because you're dishonest. That should be perfect."

"I am not dishonest," the richest man said.

They walked on.

"I've done some dishonest things, perhaps. Those things were dishonest, but not I."

The sun had set behind the hills, but its light still filled the sky. A breeze sprang up, swaying the lofty palm at the edge of his new pasture. The taller had been walking on the old woman's right; now the smaller took her left arm as if to assist her.

"Right here, I think," the smaller said. "There's a bit of a climb, but you won't find it tiring."

The taller spoke to the richest man. "This is where we part company. We wish you well."

The old woman stopped when he said that, and when she turned back to face the richest man, he saw that she was standing upon nothing, that she and they had climbed, as it appeared, a hummock of air. "Good-bye," she said. "Thank you again. Please tell everyone I'll miss them terribly, and that I'll come back just as soon as I can."

The richest man managed to nod, became aware that he was gaping, and closed his mouth.

"I suppose we ought to go on now," she said to the taller, and he nodded.

The richest man stood watching them follow a path he could not see up a hill he could not see—a hill that he could not see,

**He was like a man who had seen only bad coin all his life, he thought, and after a great many years receives a purse of real silver, fresh from the mint.**

he thought, because it had no summit. Only hills with summits were visible to his eyes. He had not known that before. When they had gone so high that the sun's light found them again, they halted; and he heard the taller say, "Do you want to take a last look? This would be a good place to do it."

"It's really quite little, isn't it?" The old woman's voice carried strangely. "It's precious, and yet it's not important."

"It used to be important," the smaller said; and it seemed to the richest man that it was the breeze that spoke.

The old woman laughed a girl's laugh. "Perhaps we'd better hurry. Do you know, I feel like running."

"We'll run if you like," the taller told her, "but we can't promise to run as fast as you can."

"We'll just walk briskly," the richest man heard the old woman say, "but it had better be very briskly. We wouldn't want to be late for the coronation."

"Oh, we won't be." (The richest man could not be sure which of her companions had replied.) "I can guarantee that. The coronation won't begin until you get there."

Night came as the richest man watched them climb higher; and at last one of his servants came too, and asked what he was looking at.

"Right there." The richest man pointed. "Look there, and look carefully. What do you see?"

The servant looked, rubbed his eyes, and looked again; and at last he said, "Three stars, master."

"Exactly," the richest man said. "Exactly."

Together they returned to the old woman's house. There was a great deal of food still on the table, and the richest man told his servant to fetch the cook and the scullion, to gather everything up, and to return it to his kitchen.

"Is this your house now, master?" his servant asked.

"Certainly not." The richest man paused, thinking. "But I'm going to take care of it for her while she's away."

The servant left, and the richest man found the figs, selected a fig, and ate it. Some people would want to tear this house down, and time and weather would do it for them, if they were allowed to. He would see that they did not: that nothing was stolen or destroyed. That necessary repairs were made. He would keep it for her. It would be his trust, and suddenly he was filled with a satisfaction near to love at being thus trusted. ❧

# RICHARD POWERS
## MASTER OF SU

By Jane Frank

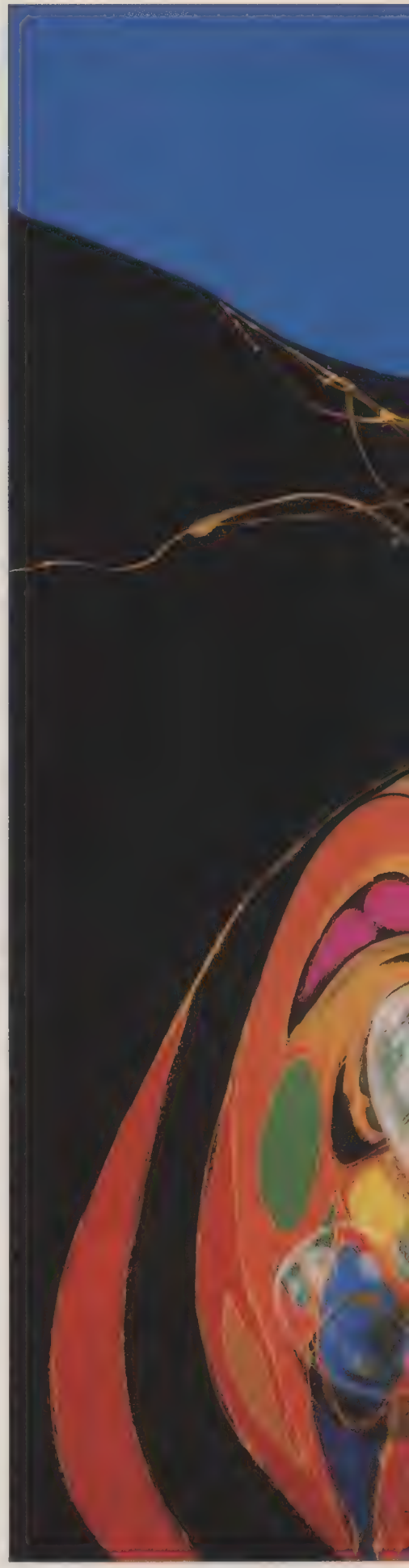
Starting with his first appearance on Ballantine's paperbacks in the 1950s, and throughout a commercial art career spanning over four decades, Richard Powers' colorful and eye-catching nonrepresentational designs were astonishingly different from the illustrations of his contemporaries. His moodily imaginative and distinctive style defined a "coming of age" for science fiction and helped set that literary genre apart from other pulp-type literature during the "golden era" of paperbacks.

But what is less well known about Powers is that a hefty proportion of the estimated 1,200-plus dust jacket and cover illustrations that he produced during his long and incredibly prolific career *were not science fictional in theme at all* ... but rather, surreal interpretations of fantasy and horror classics.

Early examples of his cover art caught the essence of fantasy's more disturbing and provocative nature in ways those wholly figurative interpretations of fairytales, legends, and myths could not. Simple, representative images of dragons, vampires, and barbarians battling the bad guys were not for Powers! Even his treatment of authors whose stories of fantasy and adventure cried out for a more realistic treatment, such as H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and Edgar Rice Burroughs, were interpreted in novel ways.

Powers' illustrations for Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan tales, for example, combined a stark, black line with a powerful and attention-getting use of color—a striking departure from the realistically depicted dramatic scenes that readers had come to expect: a muscular, athletic, and handsome ape-man fighting heroic battles with jungle animals. Frank Frazetta, influenced by the painterly approach of J. Allen St. John (whose original interpretations of Tarzan graced the first editions of Burroughs' novels, c. 1915-1925), most certainly delivered those images on paperbacks published by Ace in 1963. But not Dick Powers, whom Ballantine hired to illustrate a similar series in the same year!

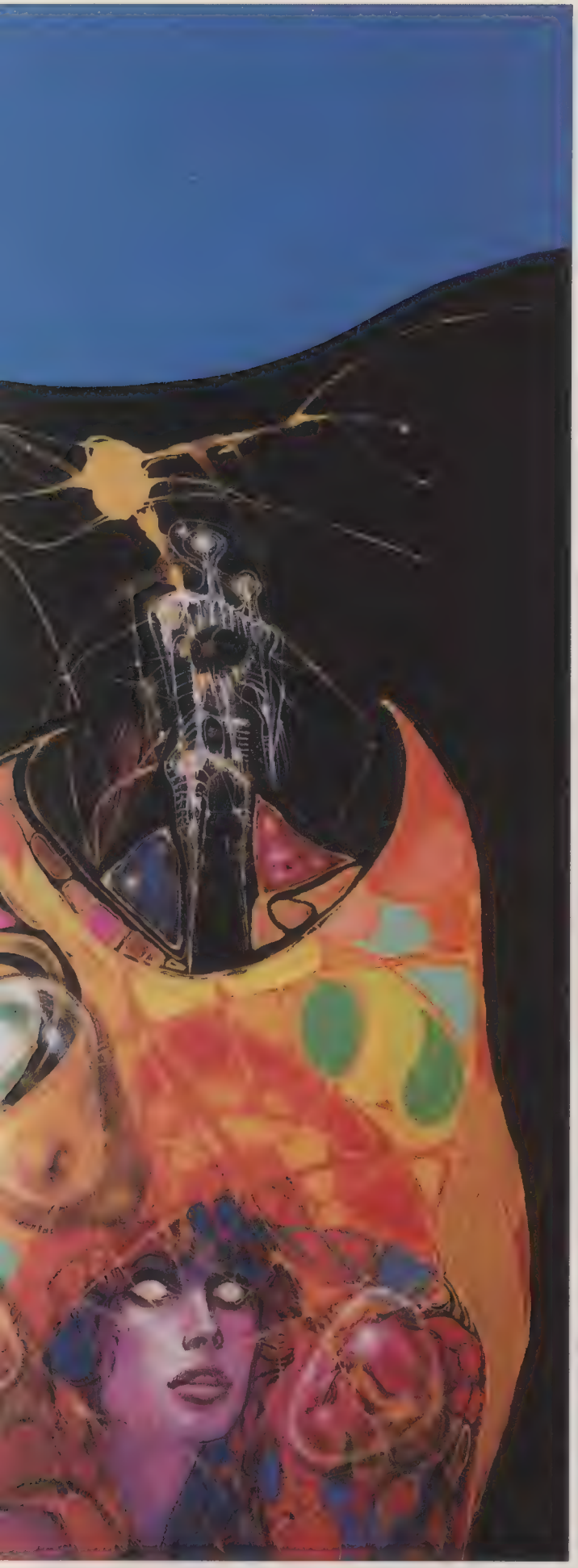
# POWERS:
# RREAL DREAMS



Consistently, and on the many paperbacks Ballantine published in this series, Powers maintained an identifiable format and a graphically simple, almost childish stylistic approach which contrasted in almost every artistic way with contemporary, previous, and subsequent interpretations of Tarzan. While clearly figurative in approach, it was an obvious departure from tradition, and stand out, they did.

The original painting of *Tarzan the Untamed* also is special for it carries "Tarzan's" autograph, that of the actor Johnny Weissmuller, acquired by Powers at the 1971 World Science Fiction Convention, in Boston, MA, at the same hotel where the annual "Dum Dum," the Edgar Rice Burroughs gathering of faithful fans, was also being held. At some point during the art show exhibition, the painting was brought to the Dum Dum, where Weissmuller was being honored. Whether Powers took the painting because he felt it was the best of the series (others were also on view), because it was closest to the doorway (and he grabbed it hurriedly, at random), because he only was asked to bring a "sample" to show off at the luncheon Weissmuller was attending, or because he intended all along to try to get Weissmuller to sign one of his paintings, we'll never know!

By the 1970s, Powers had largely moved beyond that earlier graphic style to a fantastical kind of almost pure abstraction. His "dreamscapes" featured compositionally complex but elementally simple abstract images, such as those seen in *Neutron Stars*. There we see how far indeed Powers had traveled from preceding generations of "pulp" illustrators, who relied on sentimental (and oftentimes lurid) representations of spaceships, "bug-eyed monsters," and damsels in distress. We also can see in this painting the influence of European surrealist Yves Tanguy, whose free-flow "beach" pictures and metaphysical use of space proved as influential on young



painters after World War II as Dali's. Rather than choose a particular scene from the book to show on the cover, or incorporate several different episodes from a book into a series of vignettes, Powers frequently used symbolism to represent the book as a whole. He often used composite images built of amoeba-like organic shapes to suggest other-worldly landscapes and figures.

During his long career, Powers also produced some frightfully horrific images with a heavy streak of mysticism. As John Clute put it in his *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1995), "When we think of 1950s science fiction we may see Kelly Freas; but when we dream, we dream Richard Powers."

And occasionally, he might have added, those dreams are *nightmares*. For as anyone who is an avid reader of fantasy and horror will attest, Powers' innovative and disconcerting images on horror classics in the 1950s and 1960s were so imaginatively scary that they formed a genre almost unto themselves.

His cover art for Charles Beaumont's *The Fiend in You* was a skillful blend of representationalism and surrealism, packed into a collage-style work of art. Other, later works, such as *Prehistoric Horror,* may be more abstract but the imagery is just as fiendish. Does that ancient, fossilized, fanged "jaw" floating over the horizon have meaning beyond the image we see? Should we see that central figure as a scarecrow, carrying a warning … or is it a victim, perhaps crucified? Was this painting originally conceived to illustrate a story? If so, what a fantastic story it must have been!

*PREVIOUS SPREAD:* Neutron Stars *appeared on the cover of an anthology edited by Gregory F. Gerald, Fawcett Books, 1977. LEFT:* The Game of fFlar *was the cover of the September 1978* Analog. *It illustrated the lead story, "Stardance II," by Spider and Jeanne Robinson. CENTER:* The Sirens of Titan *graced the cover of the novel by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Easton Press, 1990. BELOW:* Tarzan the Untamed *was the cover for a novel by Edgar Rice Burroughs, #7 in the series by Ballantine Books, 1963.*

POWERS' FANTASTIC, SURREAL IMAGERY ALWAYS ENCOURAGES NEW WAYS OF SEEING OUR WORLD.

Grotesque, bizarre, dark ... yet elegant in their ability to convey the macabre in the simplest of emotional terms, the paperback covers he created for horror anthologies and novels permitted Powers to fully express his artistic talents in a most memorable way.

When we see Powers' elegant abstracted forms it is clear there is a mastermind at work here. And we are reminded that the fiction inside the covers might be equally sophisticated, abstract, philosophical. Psychologically powerful, Powers' more representational works also reveal a technical ability that surprises many fans who associate his name with purely abstract surrealism. Powers was fully capable of rendering the human form and other real objects of interest with fidelity and clarity. When Powers mixed styles to insert a realistic human form, as in *Cloud Cry*, the effect is startling and beautiful. What is provocative and ultimately so satisfying about these more representational depictions, however, is that despite their reliance on realism, they never fail to present an interesting concept in a new way—one that remains undeniably the handwork of Powers.

*ABOVE:* The Fiend in You *was used on the cover of an anthology edited by Charles Beaumont, Ballantine Books, 1962.*
*LEFT:* Prehistoric Horror *was painted in the late 1970s or early 1980s. It is in acrylic on a thin wood panel mounted on illustration board.*

Powers avidly pursued his fascination with artistic experimentation throughout his life, creating innovative works in collage and mixed media. The *Sirens of Titan* is a good example of his later collages, which tended to be more sophisticated in execution than his earlier attempts. The image is quite different from his first interpretation, done for the 1959 Dell paperback, which featured a typical 1950s femme fatale in totally pop-realistic style. "Powers' cover art takes an uncommon approach that combines the surreal with the ultra real," says James Steranko, well-known artist, publisher, and author—and Powers' fan. The 1990 version is a wonderful example of that "uncommon approach." It is a masterful combination of abstract and representational styles, with a much expanded color palette, worked in painted layers of thin wooden panels to create the collage.

In 1983, thanks to publisher Nelson Doubleday, Inc., Powers found a platform for taking his audience on a remarkable journey into an imaginary nonsensical city-world he called "fFlar." The place was located in some phenomenally distant future, and/or parallel universe, that keeps its own time, so that Powers' remembrances of events could be recorded A.F. (After fFlar). Several of Powers' finest paintings, a majority of them seen earlier on book jackets, were chosen for this ambitious project. The outcome was a handsome unbound portfolio of prints titled *Spacetimewarp: Paintings by R.M. Powers.*

One of the images chosen for inclusion in the portfolio was *The Game of fFlar*, which previously had been published as a magazine cover (*Analog*, September 1978).

The invention of fFlar enabled Powers to create new titles for older works, and his funny, satirical captions provided a way for him to poke fun at himself, the establishment, literary conventions, and social institutions. Powers was a maverick that way; he had a penchant for mocking authority and he loved to make sport of conventional myths and behaviors through word and picture associations that were clever and intellectually provocative.

*The Game of fFlar* is interesting because it provided an occasion for him to link—however tenuously—the subject matter to some outlandish fFlar-related idea that was grounded in topical events, to enable readers to understand the context. Here, he took the opportunity of the captioning process to satirize youth's fascination with video games, which by the early 1980s were replacing pinball machines as a popular pastime.

His caption reads "Golden Age of Telekinesis: This culture, circa 698,291 A.F., achieved the very peak of video game addiction, and yet somehow avoided inventing the single-pole toggle switch."

Powers' fantastic, surreal imagery always encourages multiple interpretations ... and new ways of seeing our complicated world. We can approach problems and ideas off-center, indirectly, seeing them as convoluted, confusing, not easily understood, possibly beyond our understanding. *But not beyond our imagination.* ❧

# a respectful SILENCE

## *When you love someone they can never die. That's not always a good thing.*

Eli Mothersbaugh glanced at the case log scrolling by on the screen of his handheld. Three new ones so far this week alone, and there had already been a two-month backlog. Eli activated the voice recorder and made himself a note: "Either the Bureau hires more investigators next fiscal or I'm taking early retirement. There are only so many ghosts a man can hunt."

He wasn't sure if he meant it or not, but it felt good to say. Even so, there were some interesting cases waiting for him, and he still felt some of the old eagerness remaining despite it all. That didn't explain why he was driving through miles of scrubby desert to the middle of nowhere for a case that had been added to his load by the Director just that morning. Highest priority, meaning "now."

Eli groaned. Doubtless some congressman owed a constituent a favor. Eli pulled over for a moment and a huge cloud of dust rolled past his windows. He took the time to take a closer look at the travel map on his dashboard, comparing what the location indicator told him with the information on the last signpost. Two military jets roared high overhead, chasing each other through a pale blue sky like a pair of black dragonflies.

*Only about three more miles.*

Eli checked the time and the height of the sun over the nearby mountains. There were still about two hours of daylight left. He smiled. Good. Hunting ghosts was a task for the light of day. Eli hated working at night.

By Richard Parks • Illustration by John Berkey

The file said Sayers Field was abandoned, but that was a lame word compared to the stark reality. Eli got out and made one round of the cracked, weedy tarmac and rusting hangars, checking the calibration of his sensory integrator and compilation device—not so affectionately known as sensic—when he came across the old man sweeping the concrete floor of an abandoned hangar. Maintaining an abandoned airfield, just as the file had said.

*Well, at least that explains how this case got high priority.*

Eli hadn't made the connection with the urgency and the name in his file until he saw the old man—Conrad Stallings. He tapped a few keys on the sensic to request a confirmation, but he didn't really need it. The profile was unmistakable.

"You're Senator Nathaniel Stallings' father, aren't you."

The man nodded. "I don't suppose it would do any good to deny it. So. My son sent you, did he?"

Stallings leaned on his broom for a moment, studying Eli without expression as Eli in turn studied him. He was old, of course. There was a pinkness to his cheeks and a shine on his skin that suggested telomere therapy, and perhaps other treatments as well. Physically he looked about 60. Just a little older than his son, and the resemblance was unmistakable.

Eli broke the silence. "Why would you think your son sent me?"

"There's no reason for anyone else to come here, except me, or because of me. My son thinks I'm crazy. Are you a doctor?"

"Of medicine? No. Do you need one?"

The old man smiled. His teeth were perfect, though probably not those he'd been born with. "Not at all. Yet Nate keeps sending me to them. He means well." The old man stuck out his hand. "Conrad Stallings, but of course you know that."

Eli accepted the handshake. "Eli Mothersbaugh. And you're right; I'm here because of Senator Stallings."

"Thought as much. You've come to take me home, then? I woulda guessed doctor first, really. You don't look like the muscle type."

"I'm not here to force you to do anything."

"Well, well. Then why are you here?"

"I'm looking for ghosts. Your son is apparently of the opinion that you are haunted."

Conrad stared at him and drew back a bit. Eli nodded almost imperceptibly.

*He's afraid, but not of me. What, then?*

"How could Nate know—" he stopped himself, but Eli knew a trail when he saw one.

"How could Nate know what?" he asked.

Stallings didn't answer. After a moment he asked a question of his own. "How old were you when people found out ghosts were real? I mean, those who didn't already know."

"How—? Oh, about 12, I think. Why do you ask?"

"Don't you think it's strange that it took so little time for everyone to accept such an astounding revelation?"

Eli wasn't sure where Stallings senior was going with this, but he knew his job would be a lot easier if the old man cooperated.

"Not really," Eli said. "Before Flagard published his first papers there were people who believed and people who did not. After he published, there were still those who did and those who did not. To most people, though, it wasn't something they gave much thought to. Once the proof was there, the reaction was more like 'Oh, that's interesting' and then they went on with their lives."

Stallings nodded. "Yes, I can see that. But there's a group you're leaving out. A small one, maybe, but it does exist."

"What group is that?"

"The ones who had gone their whole lives not knowing one way or another," he said, "yet really, *really* hoped that the stories were true."

Night was falling rapidly. A room of sorts had been arranged for him not too far away, but Eli wasn't ready to leave just yet. He stood on the cooling tarmac and made a calibration sweep of the buildings and surrounding desert, his sensic humming quietly to itself as it digested the readings. Eli had been briefed on how residual heat could interfere with the detection of bioenergy signatures, but this was the first time he'd gotten the chance to put that knowledge into practice.

*Let's try it now.*

Eli watched the ebb and flow as the desert heat registered on his screen almost like ripples of water. Then he applied the calibration to mask it. Another moment and the heat signatures disappeared.

*Wow.*

The desert was blooming right there on his screen. Life was everywhere. Not the faintness of a specter's bioenergy reading, wan and pale as a fading memory, but bright, white-hot life. Eli enjoyed the show for a moment or two, then applied another calibration, masking out the living readings in turn. So whatever was left had to be what he was looking for, except, right now, there was nothing left. Eli did a slow scan along the horizon, and the lengthening shadows where a mountain range rose to the west.

"See anything?"

Eli almost jumped. He hadn't seen or heard the old man approach. "N-not yet. I was just calibrating, mostly."

Stallings nodded. "What's that thing?"

"This?" Eli held it up. "It's called a sensic. It detects the bioenergy signatures that identify a ghost."

"You'd see … what? Numbers on a graph?"

Eli shrugged. "Data is data. You can look at it any way you want. In mapping mode, for instance, you can see them."

Stallings studied the shadows. "What do they look like?"

"Like they did when they were alive, mostly."

"It's a funny thing, isn't it? If there is life after death, if the spirit survives, why would it have to look like the mortal coil?"

Eli shrugged. "Then again, why not? If you see the same face in the mirror for 70 years, why wouldn't you expect to see that same face the next time? Even, perhaps, if you're dead?"

Stallings laughed. "Good point, I guess."

"Besides, we're not sure that what we're seeing is the 'spirit' or anything of the sort. We can detect it, quantify it, study it, but what is it? No one knows. I certainly don't."

"Ghosts, souls, gods … Down through the centuries the questions don't change much, do they?" Stallings said. "Wise folk disagree and the numbers keep a respectful silence. You have to make up your own mind."

Eli stopped looking at his instrument. He started to say something, he wasn't sure what, but the old man was already walking toward a beat-up old pickup. "It gets chilly at night around here," he said. "I'd wait for morning to go any farther, if I were you."

Eli felt an edge on the breeze and decided to take Stallings' advice. Any ghosts in Sayers Field that night were left to themselves.

"Why do you come here?" Eli asked.

"What part of the investigation is this?" Stallings asked in turn.

They sat together by a rickety wooden table in what, Eli guessed, had once been an airmen's barracks. Stallings had used a can of Sterno and bottled water to make coffee; Eli gratefully accepted a cup.

"This is the part of the investigation," Eli said, "where I ask you simple questions and hope I get straight answers."

"You're with the Bureau, aren't you? I thought you came to hunt ghosts. Isn't that what you said?"

"Yes, but which ones?"

Stalling smiled. "For a person who wants straight answers you're fairly cryptic."

Eli shook his head. "It's just the truth. I might find a ghost, or not. I might find several. In any case, how would I know if a ghost or lack of one has anything to do with your presence here?"

Stallings nodded. "You wouldn't, would you?"

"Well, then. You see my dilemma. So. How about a trade, then? I ask a question, you answer. Then you ask. I answer."

"Sounds fair."

"All right: Why do you come here?"

"I like it here. I was stationed here."

"Stationed? But they told me Sayers Field was closed in 1947. That's over 80 years ago."

"So it was. Now then, my turn: What is the purpose of finding a ghost?"

"There's more than one answer to that question, Mr. Stallings."

"I only want one. I'm not greedy."

Eli thought about it. "All right: to settle business." Stallings looked at him rather intently. "So that part of the legends is true."

"My turn: Mr. Stallings, how old are you?"

"One hundred and seven … next Wednesday. And so: Is the business that of the dead or of the living?"

"Sometimes one, sometimes the other. Mostly? The living. Now me: Are you haunted?"

"Yes."

"By what, may I ask?"

"Memories, for one thing."

"Mr. Stallings …"

Stallings raised his hand. "You're two ahead already, and I'm too tired of questions to catch up. Anyway, time for my rounds." He got up and left Eli to finish his coffee. Eli took his time. He'd already decided that "as quickly as you can" wasn't going to be all that fast, the Director's wishes and his own notwithstanding. He finally put down his empty cup and picked up his sensic once more.

Eli scanned the barracks first, using his calibrations from the previous day. He made a slight adjustment for the temperature difference, but the screen remained blank. Even manifestations of a periodic nature always showed a faint glow, like a mark on stage awaiting a player's entrance, but there was nothing.

*If there is a ghost, it isn't here.*

Eli took his instruments out into the morning light. The sun was well above the horizon now; the mountains to the west glowed in reflected sunrise. There was still a hint of coolness in the breeze, left over from the desert night, but Eli knew it would not last long. He adjusted the sensic and started scanning.

Noon found him back in the barracks and out of the sun, staring at the blank screen of the sensic. Stallings finally reappeared and stopped to pour himself a glass of cold water from the cooler he kept in the far corner. He took a good long drink; it was hot outside and the man was nearly soaked through with sweat. Eli wasn't much better; he'd traded his coat and slacks from the day before for jeans and a white cotton shirt, but it hadn't helped deal with the heat.

"Drink something," Stallings said. "You don't want to get dehydrated out here."

"I did," Eli said, though, when he thought back, he couldn't remember if it was the truth or not. He tended to get like that when he was "on the trail," as he called it. He paused to drink from the canteen he'd brought, just in case. The water was warm and didn't bring much virtue with it. Eli grimaced. Stallings rinsed out his coffee mug and poured that full of cold water for Eli without comment. Eli accepted it gratefully.

"So," Stallings said. "You found anything?"

Eli drained his cup. "Yes. I just don't know what yet."

Stallings' eyebrows went up. "Oh?"

Eli tapped a few keys on the sensic and then turned the instrument's screen so Stallings could see. "If I had one of the newer holocapable models you could see this better, but here's the layout of the airbase."

The image on the sensic's screen wasn't quite three-dimensional, but with perspective, color, and shading the illusion was close enough. Eli had scanned in most of the main hangar area and what was left of the runways that morning. Now he mapped his data onto the backdrop those scans provided. "Do you see it?" he asked.

"A faint bluish glow … rather like a motion blur."

Eli smiled. "Good guess. These are bioenergy trails. There's a small but definite and very measurable effect those things have on ambient air. Sometimes the traces are apparent for as much as 24 hours."

"So these are a ghost's footprints?"

"Something like that. Does the path it took mean anything to you?"

Stallings leaned close, then shook his head. "Hangar 7 to the CO's office … or what used to be. The trail doesn't start there, though."

Eli stared at him. "How did you know that?"

The old man just shrugged his shoulders. "Take me to the ghost," he said. "And I'll tell you."

*"Ghosts, souls, gods … Down through the centuries the questions don't change much, do they?"*

They were nearing the north end of the second runway. The tarmac was badly broken there, pushed up by weeds and scrub and undercut by the occasional hard rain. A little further and the tarmac surrendered entirely to scrub and cactus.

Eli looked up from his sensic. "There's nothing left to follow," he said. "It's faded."

Stallings looked out over the vast expanse of nothing. "What time is it?"

Eli checked the time index on the sensic. "Four thirty-five. Why?"

"I think we need to wait about 15 minutes," Stalling said.

"Wait for what, may I ask?"

Stalling smiled. "If you've got a brain in your head, you already know."

Eli didn't bother to ask any more questions. He adjusted the gain of the sensic and pointed it in the last known direction the ghost's path had taken. Stallings stood beside him, his eyes now turned toward the sensic's screen. They waited, but not for very long. At time index 16 the screen flickered to life.

"It's coming," Eli said.

Stallings didn't say anything. He just looked at the sensic's screen as the image resolved from a faint glow to a human outline. The closer the apparition came, the finer the detail on the screen until the flight jacket and helmet were clearly visible.

"It's a pilot," Eli said. "The Second World War, from the look of his uniform."

Stallings grunted. "People died in that war. Some of them even died stateside. I was there, remember? No surprise about that."

Eli glanced at Stallings but the old man's face was hard and unreadable. Eli finally shrugged and turned his attention back to the screen.

"No, I suppose not. I've been dealing with the ghosts of that war since I started with the Bureau."

"Then I guess very little would surprise you."

"It doesn't happen often," Eli admitted.

"It's about to."

"What …? Oh." Eli's breath left him in a little gasp. "That pilot … she's a woman!"

"Surprise."

"You knew," Eli said. It wasn't a question.

They sat back in the barracks in the shade. The sun still had a few hours before it was due to set behind the hills and let the heat of the day fade. Eli passed on the coffee and drank water alone as the sweat on his collar began to cool. Stallings had produced a bottle of very old scotch from his bag and he was drinking that. He seemed more than a little cheerful.

"I hoped," Stallings said. "Strange as that may sound."

"You've been mysterious far too long, Mr. Stallings. Who was she?"

"Jane Somersby. And put yourself in my place, Mr. Mothersbaugh: All I knew for certain was that my son sent you. I played it close to the vest until I knew for sure why you were here. Now I know my boy got it right for once."

"I'll take that as a compliment, but that doesn't answer my question. The only female flyers in your branch in 1943 were the Women Airforce Service Pilots. Just to be sure I've downloaded their stats and they told me my recollection is correct: 37 were killed either in training or on duty. One is missing to this day. Jane Somersby was not among them."

The old man looked at him with something like admiration. "You've done your homework, that's for sure. Or has the subject come up before?"

Eli shrugged. "Bureau matters are confidential, but it's no secret that war creates a lot of ghosts. Now, then. Why did you lie to me? Who was Jane Somersby?"

"I didn't lie. She was a pilot, like I said. Only she wasn't a WASP. Do you know why the WASPs were organized in the first place?"

"To free male pilots from aircraft-ferrying duty and other noncombat roles so they could be placed where they were most needed. That was the official line, as I understand it. It was an experiment. One that worked very well by most accounts."

Stallings stared off at nothing. "It was a different world then. Maybe hard to understand now, but there were many who were dead-set against the whole idea. At least one of the WASPs died because her plane was sabotaged, maybe even by her own ground crew. They don't teach that in the history books, do they?"

Eli remembered reading about the incident. "It was never officially confirmed," he said, and realized then how weak that sounded.

Stallings laughed. "No. It wouldn't have been. Well, Jane was another experiment, back when we didn't know which way the war was going to turn and how much it would take to win it: A female combat pilot. All top secret, of course. People might have thought we were desperate if word got out. Bad for morale. The whole project is still classified and buried so deep it'll probably never be found."

"Then why are you telling me?"

"Because I'm 107 years old and I no longer give a damn about secrets."

"If that were so," Eli said, "you wouldn't be chasing this one. Or haunting this airfield even more thoroughly than Jane Somersby."

Stallings looked at him with such a lack of expression that he seemed, for an instant, to be made of painted stone. "And which one would that be?"

"The one that Jane Somersby took to her grave back in 1943. Or are you going to claim that Miss Somersby has nothing to do with your obsession with this place?"

"No. She's got everything to do with it. But what good does knowing that she's the ghost do me? It's not as if I can change …" His voice trailed off.

"Change what?"

"Anything! I said I'd hoped that she was still here, but that's not really true. I knew she was. Just knew it. That's the real reason I came back. I thought perhaps if I could see her that I would know, that maybe it would make a difference. It didn't."

Eli considered. "Mr. Stallings … Conrad. I still don't know what you're trying to accomplish here, but I will say you're wrong that there's nothing you can do. There is one more thing, if you'd like to try."

Stallings looked at Eli then, and his face was anything but stony. "What?"

Eli almost regretted speaking, but he couldn't bring himself to dash a hope so newly raised. "If we're very lucky, you can talk to her."

*There was nothing of pain and regret on her face ... Nor was there anger, or fear, or confusion."*

Eli looked at the two old-style VR helmets ruefully. *Next year I'm getting a sensic with true holo projection capability, and the budget be damned.*

Stallings, for his part, stared at his own helmet with deep suspicion. "Is this contraption really necessary?"

"It's a bit primitive, I'm afraid, but 'twill serve. The sensic will read from two staggered ports on your helmet and map those readings to the right and left display on your goggles. Full depth perception."

Stallings slowly eased the helmet on. "That explains seeing. How can she talk to me without breath?"

"The sensic's neural net runs pattern-recognition algorithms on the apparition's facial expressions, assuming she's aware of you enough to try talking. There's a slight latency, and of course she has to be looking right at you for it to work."

Stallings smiled. "Reads lips, eh? Clever."

"Just remember that not all ghosts are created equal. Some are little more than an imperfect memory of the person they used to be. Not even self-aware. This is a chance, Conrad. That's all."

"That's more than I had. Let's do it."

Eli lowered his own helmet into place and blinked up the command menu. He didn't use the voice input; he'd always found it too distracting when trying to make contact. The desert rose around them in a three-dimensional construct created by the sensic. There was a bit of pixelation toward the horizon, especially if you turned your head quickly, and the scene had that shiny, plastic look of older computer animations. Eli adjusted the phong shading and light controls a bit, and the scene improved. It still wouldn't quite pass for reality, but it was good enough. Eli and Stallings stood together on the stage, looking like little more than mannequins.

"Is this how we'll look to her?"

"No one's really sure how we look to a ghost. They don't like being interviewed as a rule." Eli checked the chronometer on the display, then set the sensic for auto response and blinked off the menu. "It's time."

And it was. The ghost was visible in the distance, but not as a blue smear this time. There was a definite human shape walking down the runway from the old crash site. Eli wondered, for a moment, at the uncanny time sense of this sort of apparition. Always manifesting at the same moment, down to the second. The instant they died, he assumed. But why these, when others died in situations equally sudden, and yet manifested entirely differently? It always seemed, in any field, that there was so much you could know for certain, and so much you might never know. The trick was learning one from the other before you let a mystery drive you mad.

*Maybe it has nothing to do with time sense or being punctual. Maybe they don't have a choice.*

Unfortunately, time-repeat apparitions were those least likely to be contactable. Sometimes they didn't even qualify as a memory at all. They were more like a recording that was simply played at the same time index every day, no more self-aware than images on film. What they were calling Jane Somersby might be no more Jane Somersby than an old photograph.

*We'll know soon enough.*

She was getting closer; the image was quite clear now, moving past and sometimes through bushes and saguaro. The sensic, tuned to her specific bioenergy signatures, cast her image more clearly than Eli's or Conrad's. Perhaps she was no more than a picture, but she was a very clear one and not at all what Eli had deduced from the first blurred images. Jane Somersby strode through the scrub and rocks, her bearing erect, her eyes focused straight ahead. There was nothing of pain and regret on her face, things Eli was quite used to seeing on a ghost. Nor was there anger, or fear, or confusion—any one of the number of things past experience had told him to expect. She moved with poise and confidence, intent on something but giving no hint as to what that might be.

*Appearances can be deceiving, but I'd be willing to bet she's definitely not "earthbound" in any traditional sense. Why is she here at all?*

The apparition gave no clues that he could see, and when Conrad walked ahead to meet her and spoke her name she gave no response at all. She walked past him as if he weren't there. In another moment she passed Eli the same way.

"I'm sorry, Conrad. It doesn't look like we'll be able to reach her."

Conrad shook his head. "I will. I have to. There's got to be a way."

"She seems very focused. If we knew what she wanted...." Eli thought about it. "Wait a minute. That first time she appeared, where did you say she was heading?"

Conrad frowned. "It looked like she was heading for the CO's office."

"I never saw anything like that."

"That's because it's not there anymore. It used to sit across the street from the barracks. It was struck by lightning and burned down years ago."

"Why would she go there?"

Conrad grimaced. "Of course. That's exactly where she would go. Come on."

Stallings sprinted ahead, rather spry for a man of his years. Eli hurried to catch up. When he reached the apparition he didn't even hesitate but ran past her, with Eli close behind.

"I don't understand. Why is she going ... to the CO's office?" Eli asked, in between gasps for air.

Stallings wasn't even winded. "She wouldn't go anywhere else. Damn me for not realizing it sooner!"

"You didn't answer—"

"No time. Can that contraption of yours recreate a building so she could see it?"

"Why? She saw *us* and it didn't make any difference."

"That's because she wasn't *looking* for us, Mr. Mothersbaugh. Can you do it or not?"

"Well ... probably. I can ... program something crude of the approximate dimensions and project a weak bioenergy field simulation of it, but that's all. She will see it, but we won't without the helmets. I can't do a real projection."

"It might do. Put it there."

Stallings stopped just past the barracks, pointing to a littered patch of desert where the remains of a foundation were just visible. Eli used those to dimensions to rough out the structure while he tried to catch his breath. Stallings called out corrections and suggestions from time to time, all the while keeping a close eye on the path the ghost normally took behind them.

"She's almost here!"

"I'm done."

It wasn't much, little more than a three-dimensional shaded blueprint, but the walls were in place and matched the foundations.

"I'd better open the door," Eli said. "She can't and neither can we."

Eli made a few quick adjustments. Stallings went inside, with Eli only a step behind. Jane Somersby stood across the road.

"She's stopping," Eli said.

"Fade out," Stallings said. "I know you can. Let me handle this."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

Stallings smiled a wistful smile. "Me too."

Eli took himself out of the projections, though he kept the helmet in place so he could follow what was happening. The apparition still stood on the far side of the road. There was a hesitance to her that had not been apparent before.

*Maybe it's what she expects to see*, Eli thought, *but it can't look right.*

"What are you waiting for, Lieutenant?"

Eli was startled. It took him a moment to realize it was Stallings speaking, and in a tone Eli had never heard the old man use before.

"Well? You think I've got nothing better to do than wait for you?"

The hesitation was gone. Jane Somersby crossed the road and snapped to attention in front of Stallings.

"Report, Lieutenant. We've both waited long enough."

They were back in the barracks. This time Stallings drank coffee and Eli borrowed the man's bottle of whiskey. He took a good, long pull.

"You didn't tell me you were the CO of this airbase," he said. "Among other things."

Stallings shrugged. "I'm not ... or rather I wasn't. I was the chief of Jane Somersby's ground crew."

"But why did you need her to tell you what had happened? Wasn't there an investigation at the time?"

Stallings drank his coffee. "Of course there was. Inconclusive. It was all the excuse the brass needed to pull the plug on the project though."

"And you believed in the project."

Stallings shrugged again. "Let's just say I believed in Jane."

Eli remembered the way Stallings had looked at the apparition when she first appeared and didn't ask any more about that. "All right, but why were you so determined to learn the truth? Training crashes were nothing unusual."

"They are when the crew chief catches one of his own men trying to sabotage a plane."

Eli just looked at him. "Jane's?"

Stallings nodded. "Corporal Parsons had an explanation which I didn't believe. I had no real proof, but I know what I saw, so I had him transferred since that was all I could do short of killing the sumbitch. Then ..." He didn't finish.

"Then Jane's plane went down on a routine training flight."

"I had to know the truth, Mr. Mothersbaugh. I had to know if that jackass Parsons or somebody else murdered Jane. I had no reason to suspect anyone else, but then I had no reason to suspect Parsons until I caught him."

"You were in love with her, weren't you?"

He looked wistful. "Sure I was. I don't think she loved me. Oh, we dated even though we weren't supposed to, but I don't think she loved anything but flying. Then she died and all I had left of her was the question of how and why. It took me 80 years to answer that."

"The crash was an accident. Jane said so. Was it worth so much of your life to know that for certain?"

Stallings looked grim. "She wasn't killed because of me, because of something my crew did or failed to do. Yes, I'd say that was worth knowing."

Eli hesitated. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe it was your obsession that kept Jane here in the first place? That all this time you've held her memory here so it could give you what you wanted?"

Stallings didn't answer for a long time. Then: "Maybe it did. Maybe I thought about that for a very long time. Call it obsession on my part; that's fair. Yet she did remain. What would you call it on her part?"

"I don't know," Eli said, after a long pause. "But I do know it was a great deal more than nothing. Go home, Mr. Stallings. For Jane's sake. For your own."

Stallings smiled. "You have a good heart, Mr. Mothersbaugh."

Eli waited until Conrad Stallings got into his truck and drove away. He thought of making one last sweep with the sensic, but there was no point. He got into his car and left Sayers Field to emptiness and respectful silence. ❧

# ARTIE'S ANGELS

## Every generation gets the hero they truly need.

By Catherine Wells

Illustration by Scott Grimando

When you set out to perpetrate a lie, I suppose it's counterproductive to write down the truth like this. But whatever population survives here on Earth is not likely to read this, much less believe it. Most of them can't read anymore as it is—not BookEnglish, anyway—and it will probably get worse before it gets better. Much, much worse.

My birth name is Faye, but I have not used it since I was 10. That's the year we moved inside the radiation shield, into a wreck of a building in Kansas Habitat. My mother cried, because my little brother died just before we got there, and she kept moaning that if only we'd gotten inside sooner, he might have lived. But you had to have either money or skills to get inside the radiation shield, and my parents had neither. So we fried our skins and our eyeballs in Earth's unfiltered sunlight until enough rich people moved offworld to make room for us under the shield.

Artie knocked at my window the first night; he'd shinned up the drainpipe from his apartment just below. The artificial rain no longer worked in our sector, of course, because the infrastructure was well on the road to hell, but the drainpipe was still there. Artie D'Angelo was this skinny kid, just my age, a little goofy-looking, but agile as a monkey. When I saw him hanging on that drainpipe, I was more amazed than frightened. "Hi!" he said through the glass, grinning widely. He had dark, curly hair, deep brown eyes, and big ears.

I climbed onto my bed, which was under the window, and stared at him. "You gonna open up?" he asked. "Or let me hang on this drainpipe all night?"

With a glance over my shoulder to make sure my door was shut, I lifted the sash and Artie climbed in. "I'm Artie," he introduced. "I live downstairs."

"Faye," I replied. "You can't use the door?"

"I knocked before," he said, "but no one would answer."

I knew the cause of that. "My dad's scared to open the door," I told Artie.

He shrugged. "In this neighborhood, you're better off. But I saw you moving in, and I thought you must be from outside, so you'd probably need someone to show you around."

During the next months, Artie did just that. Born in KanHab, he knew its grid upground and under. If not for his tutelage, I would probably have died in that first year. By the time they got around to letting dregs like my family in, half the sectors were more or less lawless, and a 10-year-old kid could easily get snuffed if she didn't know where to run and where to hide. Artie taught me that and more. In those early days, he was my salvation; in these latter days, I shall be his.

It was while we were hiding from the Citizen Patrols in B4 that he first spoke the name I took as my own. That was back when the Sisters of Literacy still tried to run schools in B4, which was as close as they would get to B9 where Artie and I lived. School didn't excite me, but Mom wanted me to go, and Artie insisted crossing into B4 was at least as safe as living in B9. Most of the time that was true, but not when the Citizen Patrols were out.

We knew there was going to be trouble that day, because Melissa's desk had been empty at roll call, and word got around by recess that she'd been found in a trash bin, missing a few parts. So the Citizen Patrols were out that afternoon, looking for someone to punish. B9ers were a favorite target. Artie and I ran from shadow to shaft, upground and under, trying to stay out of their way. We watched from beneath an abandoned maintenance cart as they rousted three teenage boys playing hoops in the street.

The boys must have scanned as B4s, because the CPs started to walk away; but then one of the boys said something. Something dirty, and cruel. And a CP just shot him. With a crossbow, that is, because no pulse or projectile weapons were ever allowed in the habitats—too much danger of damaging the shielding. When the other two boys went for their knives, the CPs shot them, too.

I'd seen people die before—things were even worse outside than under the shield. But this was the first time I knew—I *knew*—if I twitched, I'd be next. One CP went over to kick the boys and make sure they were dead. Another one cut open the mouthy boy's pants and sliced off his privates. "That's for Melissa," I heard him say, and he flung the bloody flesh across the street. It landed right beside the cart where we lay hidden.

The sight of it there, so close to my face, made me gag in horror. I stuffed my fist in my mouth to keep from screaming, and Artie pulled me to him, pushing my face against his scrawny chest and holding me tight. "Shh," he breathed in my ear, knowing both how terrified I was, and how bad it would be if the CPs heard us. "They can't hurt you. They can't hurt you, Faye, because—because you're magic."

I was so startled I stopped crying, wondering what in the dying world he was talking about. I couldn't see the Civilian Patrol, the way he had me pressed up against him, but after a minute or two he let go of me so I knew they had gone. "What you say, magic?" I demanded in the barest of whispers, not knowing how far away they were.

"They left, didn't they?" he whispered back. "Magic. You've got the magic name."

I told him what I thought he was full of.

"Maybe," he agreed, checking the street carefully to be sure it really was clear. "But your name, 'Faye,' that's like Morgan le Fay, right?" He started to squirm out from under the cart.

I squirmed right after him. "Who?"

"King Arthur's sister," he said. "She was magic. She took Arthur to the Isle of Avalon where he couldn't die."

Later that night, Artie shinned up the drainpipe to my room, and we sat there for hours in the dark while he told me stories of King Arthur and his knights: men who defended the helpless instead of victimizing them, men who fought against the villains of their age and inevitably prevailed. Not until many years later did I learn what a spin he put on the stories for me that night, to make me believe that once there had been people who cared about the likes of me, who stood for justice and nobility of spirit, who made it honorable to protect the weak.

That night I took the name of Morgan, not because I ever believed it was magic, but because I wanted to be a part of that ideal. I needed the hope that King Arthur represented, and I saw it in *my* Arthur—Artie. To think of myself as his sister pleased me in a quiet, deep way I could not explain.

Nor was I the only one so drawn to Artie. He had already begun to acquire a following when I met him: children he had grown up with, and others like myself whom he befriended along the way. There was safety in numbers, as long as no crossbows were involved. A pack offered the protection of a dozen knives that could not all be taken away at once. And then we discovered another form of protection—or rather, Artie discovered it, and it changed him. It changed us all.

We were thieves in those days; I hate to say it, but that's what we were. Artie was a thief. I was a thief. There was an ethic to our larceny, for we never stole from people poorer and weaker than we were—the rather rude beginnings of the Code. But we took things we did not own and thought no more of it than a goat thinks of cropping grass. That's how we came by the first bicycles.

José started it. A procurement convoy had come in from outside, loaded with goods for the Launch Pad. That's what we called the sectors where the engineers and administrators and other elite live, those who will surely have berths on the next transport ship carrying people away from this dying planet. While the last driver stopped to flirt with the gatekeeper, José jimmied the lock on his truck and slipped inside. He was working for some older kids, of course, but by the time they roadblocked the convoy in G5, José had the cargo mapped out so they knew which crates to snatch. One of them had six bicycles.

The bike was his fee. No one could have been prouder than José when he showed up with that bicycle. He carried it on his shoulder, because he didn't know how to ride, and it had slipped its chain, anyway. Artie looked at it, and looked at it, and I could see the ideas spinning through his head like a cyclone. He was 13 by then, and

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though he was still skinny, he'd grown into his ears and his teeth enough so the girls were starting to give him second looks; but when an idea possessed him, he still looked like a goofy kid, his mouth hanging slack and his eyes glazed over.

"You can ride it, right?" José asked, because like most of the younger kids, he believed implicitly that Artie knew everything worth knowing and had all skills worth acquiring. Artie had even wrangled his way into Spark Academy, which amazed everyone. Kids from B9 didn't get into Spark Academy. Most of them didn't bother with school at all.

Artie had not answered José's question; I wasn't sure he had even heard it. I nudged him. "I can ride," I told him softly. "Learned outside. Bikes lay around free-for-nothing; my old man, he fix one up for me."

Finally Artie's eyes left the bicycle and fastened on me, still whirling with the enchantment of his racing thoughts. "Your dad

can fix bicycles?"

I shrugged. "He know machines 'n' things. That how we got under shield, finally. Learned him welding."

At that, Artie scowled and came back to the present. "Don't talk street, Morgan," he chided. "You've got to practice BookEnglish if you're going to get into the Academy with me."

That was his dream for me, that I would pass the entrance exams to go to Spark Academy, too. I worked at it, because he thought I should, but I never had much hope. "Yes, Artie, he knows something about bicycles," I said with exaggerated articulation. "I'm not sure how much."

It was enough. When my father got off shift, he had the bike running in less than 15 minutes; then Artie took it, and me, and found a deserted stretch of tunnel where he could master the two-wheeler without an audience. I was the only one he trusted to witness the ignominy of his early failures. A week later when he returned the bike to José, he rode into the street where the others waited, braked to a smooth stop, and dismounted with practiced ease.

"We need more of these," Artie announced. "We need every one of us to be mounted. We can outrun anyone on these things. We can pick up our families' rations and not worry about being mugged on the way home, because no one will be able to catch us. We can get to a friend who's in trouble, and we can get away from trouble when it comes looking for us. Bicycles are the answer."

And because he was Artie, we all believed him.

Over the next year, bicycles sprouted like primalloy mushrooms in the streets of B9. We lost one kid in the process—Torey got shot by Security making a run out of F5, where he should never have been grazing—but that left 17 of us on wheels. Knights of the Wheel Round, I laughed.

You might wonder how Artie could develop such a following, win the loyalty of so many people who would—and sometimes did—sacrifice themselves and their own well-being to follow his Code. The answer, I'm convinced, lies in three qualities Artie possessed in greater measure than other human beings: compassion, conviction, and compulsion. When Artie latched onto a notion, he pursued it with a focus ordinary mortals can't hope to achieve, and the intensity of his devotion sucked other people in like a black hole.

Bicycles became his world. Between my father's sketchy knowledge and some books we found online, Artie not only learned how to maintain and repair the bikes, he also learned frame geometry and stress factors and performance metrics. I learned some, too, because you couldn't hang around Artie and not learn, but mostly I stuck with maintenance and repair. It wasn't enough for him, though, that we should all learn to ride and care for our bikes—we had to train. He had us up before dawn each day, racing along the empty streets of B9 and B7. Our legs grew thick with muscle as we vied with each other for dominance in speed and endurance.

Soon we ventured out of our home sectors, becoming a familiar sight throughout the upground B's and G's, and even in parts of the A's. Seventeen cyclists whooshing along in a pack at 20-plus miles an hour is an impressive sight—that was both good and bad. A pack of thugs in A12 called the Big Dogs tried to lay traps for us whenever we crossed their sector, and we crossed it often escorting Artie to and from Spark Academy. But we were always too quick and too smart and too mobile for them.

There were two reasons Artie kept running the gauntlet to get to Spark Academy. Okay, three. The third was that he couldn't stand for someone to tell him he couldn't do something. But the first was that he *liked* learning. It charged his batteries. He was into mechanical engineering, and the teachers at Spark actually encouraged him in that. I guess they thought he could help keep habitat infrastructure from collapsing around us.

But the second reason he kept going to the Academy was Yvonne.

Now, Artie had girlfriends in the neighborhood, and had since he was old enough to understand why a man would want to insert Tab A into Slot B. He didn't exactly tell me the first time he got laid—he did have some notion that I was a girl and wouldn't appreciate hearing about his conquests—but I knew it had happened, because I saw the girl try to take ownership of him. Fat chance she had. Artie always had champagne taste when it came to girls, and you don't find champagne in B9.

Yvonne was champagne. I never met her, but I knew because Artie told me all about her. He'd lost his heart, and it wasn't the kind of thing you could tell other guys, so he told me. Most of what he was learning in Spark Academy, he confided, he could pick up out of books and vids that were available remotely, even on the archaic B9 equipment. And besides, he could earn a ration just running the courier service he'd started, so he didn't really need to get into a university program. But a girl like Yvonne wouldn't marry a courier and live in B9. So he had to get a degree, and a better housing assignment, so he could make a life with Yvonne.

For the record, I think he would have gone to the Academy anyway. Not that he didn't like running courier—he liked using his cycling skills, evading obstacles, flirting with danger only to escape. He liked organizing the rest of us as couriers, and he liked being able to deliver packages quickly and safely for people who were afraid to walk the streets. As with protecting smaller children, and helping outsiders adjust to the habitat, it was a way for him to touch people's lives and make them better. The need to do that was deep in him, and it was the foundation of the Code he established.

For Yvonne, though, he needed to be more than a courier. The others in our pack knew Artie had an Academy girlfriend, but they assumed she was no different than the girls he fooled around with in B9—except it was somehow more exciting to get your rocks off with some C5 princess, so the rest of the guys looked at Artie in awe. That was why, when Yvonne dumped him, he climbed the drainpipe to my room and cried in my arms.

We were never lovers, Artie and I. He never wanted me that way, and I knew better than to try enticing him. It would have been laughable: I am a homely woman, and I was an ugly child. My mother said it was the radiation I endured outside—she blamed everything on radiation—but I didn't have to look far to find the long jaw and the close-set eyes I inherited, or the limp, colorless hair and crooked teeth. My shape, too, eschews beauty: I have a bony frame and tiny breasts. There are boys who don't care what Slot B looks like, as long as it will accommodate Tab A, but Artie was never one of them.

So I held him the night Yvonne rejected his love, knowing this was as close to him as I would ever get. The next day he went out and built his first bicycle.

Before he graduated from Spark Academy, the counselors there tried to push him into vocational training because he was so gifted in working with his hands: carving, molding, welding. "Wouldn't you be happier," they asked, "crafting components? Building machines? Turning out a product?" If Yvonne had dumped him earlier, he might have yielded to their pressure; but he had told them he could do both: design and build. With his heart torn to shreds, he needed to prove that.

It was no work of art, that first bicycle: primalloy tubes patch-welded together. But it was serviceable, and it was a start. DeRon and I took over running the courier business—we already handled the routine maintenance and repair of our pack bicycles—so Artie would have time to build. His instructors in the university engineering program derided him, he told me, for wasting his time building "toys." New robots to evacuate clogged water and sewer lines, or innovative geometries to prop up the sagging tunnels of KanHab—those were projects worthy of a mechanical engineer, they said. Not swift transportation through the unsavory streets of lawless sectors.

But he did all they asked of him by day, and when darkness blanketed KanHab, he locked the front door of the abandoned storefront that served as our headquarters, called up his drawings, and began to build.

Artie made it his business to see that every child in B9 who kept the Code had a sleek, efficient machine that could carry him or her away from danger. The Code was fairly simple at that point: Take care of your bike and your friends; never fight when you can run; study and learn; make things better for everyone, not just yourself. Those same tenets were required of everyone in his pack.

By this time we had left thievery behind and were a legitimate business, recognized by Admin, delivering parcels and providing reconnaissance for electric cart convoys and groups of pedestrians throughout KanHab. We wore patches that showed we were part of Artie's pack—Artie's Angels, we called ourselves—with authorization to cross sectors and ride through public tunnels and buildings. Admin gave us helmets, gloves, and light body armor as part of our ration, and they stamped out cleats for Artie to fasten on flexible, steel-shanked shoes so we could lock into our pedals. When we rode as a pack, armored and shod identically, people stood aside, gaping.

As our customer base expanded to other sectors, our fees—originally accepted as comestibles, tools, and clothing—were paid more and more in ExCees, or Exchange Credits, flushed through habitat accounting and redeemable in rations, entertainment, or just about anything else we could want. I drew a single ration for myself and gave everything else I earned to Artie, to buy materials for the bicycles that gave the kids of B9 a chance: a chance to learn, a chance to grow, a chance to believe in the goodness and worth of other people.

But it's hard to give hope to a dying planet.

All the time Artie was trying to make things better in B9, outside KanHab, life became more and more futile. Plants and animals died in the unfiltered sunlight, people starved to death, babies were born with mutations so horrible their own parents killed them. Brutality reigned, for life was short and ugly, and people snatched what pleasure they could; too often that meant the adrenalin rush gained by inflicting one's will on someone or something else. How long the Reapers were a problem outside, I don't know; but the day they broke through Security into KanHab is a day we will never forget.

They rode old combustion-engine motorcycles, powered by whatever alcohol they could manufacture to fuel them. Their philosophy was nihilistic: Earth and its inhabitants were doomed, so why not help them along the path to destruction? Whether or not they died in the process seemed of no consequence to the Reapers. Of the 20 or so who crashed the gate that day, only two made any effort to escape the certain death they found at the hands of KanHab's defenders. But before they died, 18 Security officers and over a hundred civilians fell to the Reapers' projectile weapons—not to mention the people they simply rode down. Hundreds more burned to death in the fires they started.

Infrastructure at the gate, including the radiation shield, was so badly damaged that Admin sealed off the entire sector and simply built a new gate further in. They did nothing to repair the collapsed tunnels and fire-gutted buildings of A7 and 8. Why should they? Physical space was not what kept people out of KanHab, but the lack of food from our greenhouses. Housing was plentiful, and it was only residential areas the Reapers had terrorized in their 18-hour frenzy of destruction.

Artie got two months off from classes while he and other students helped repair the damage to the shield and other critical parts of the infrastructure. One day as we worked in C17 underground—Artie as field engineer and DeRon and I as his crew chiefs—the most strikingly beautiful woman I have ever seen approached us: tall and lithe, with high cheekbones in an oval face and dark, unblemished skin.

"Mr. D'Angelo?" she asked, and her voice was like thick cream, a smooth, rich fluid that spilled out and soaked into the thirsty air.

Artie was smitten; it was written all over his face as he stepped down from the ladder he had just mounted. "I'm Artie D'Angelo," he said.

I tried to see what Saronda was seeing: a wiry young man well shy of six feet, with a flat gut and thighs like tree trunks; dark hair clumped in curls from sweating beneath his hard hat; red-rimmed eyes and two days' growth of beard telling how little he had done the past 48 hours except work to salvage something from the destruction.

But she smiled, a smile as warm and sincere as it was brilliantly white. "I'm Saronda McCabe. I understand you build bicycles."

She was an electrical engineering student, and her father worried about her traveling from her home in F3 to her practicum in C7. She thought a bicycle might be the answer. Artie agreed, provided she also got some practical training in avoiding danger—which he, of course, would be happy to provide at no charge. DeRon and I exchanged a look, then took our crew in search of some lunch while the two of them made eyes and traded compliments. "Ten ExCees he's in her pants before morning," DeRon muttered as we turned a corner.

I didn't think so—she was high-class stuff—but I wasn't stupid

enough to take the bet. Good thing—I would have lost.

Once Saronda's bicycle was made, we started swinging through F3 on our morning rides to pick her up for a couple of miles, after which she and Artie would break off and go their own way—because, he said, she couldn't keep up with us quite yet. That was true, and they did stay with us longer as she improved. But she had a housing assignment separate from her parents—her father was high up in Admin—and within a couple of months we were picking up Artie in F3, too.

His bicycle building went by the wayside. All the kids in B9 had bikes by this time, anyway, and every Angel had a top-notch custom machine. On weekends he came back to B9 to check on the courier operation and hang with his pack, and he was still the same Artie: same huge smile, same warm laugh, same abiding concern for his neighborhood. But the kids missed him, and some of them started acting out, breaking the Code. That brought him back for a while, because he recognized that his presence was necessary to keep them on track, to keep them believing. I worried more about him then, though, because when night came and things started locking up, that's when he'd get on his bicycle and head for F3 to see Saronda. It was a bad hour to be out without your pack.

I told myself that Artie was making a terrible mistake, that he was headed for another fall like with Yvonne; but I don't think I really believed that. He was too happy, and Saronda—blast her sculpted, perfect face—was a *nice person*. Genuinely nice. I *liked* her, hard as I tried not to. Once she came with us into B9, because she wanted to see where Artie and the rest of us lived, to meet the children and hear them recite the Code. "I wanted to join the Sisters of Literacy when I was younger," she confided to me as Artie explained to a nine-year-old how the derailleur worked and the easiest way to replace a slipped chain. "But my dad wouldn't hear of it. He pointed out that where we're going—"

She broke off suddenly, and I saw the pain on her face before she changed the topic quickly. But I knew. I *knew*. And I wanted to scream at Artie for being so stupid, and at Saronda for not stopping this, and at myself for not shaking them both and making them face reality—but they were so in love. All we have here in B9 are moments. I figured they were entitled to theirs.

It was September when the transport ship arrived and began to load those who could pay the co-op fee for their passage offworld. There was a brief stir of excitement as a renegade Reaper popped out from wherever he'd been hiding for 10 months to throw a homemade grenade at the shuttle when it docked. He died with six crossbow bolts in his chest, and some heroic Security officer threw himself on the grenade so there was no damage to the shuttle. But I

watched it all on the news without much interest, waiting instead for the tap at my window.

Artie's grin through the glass was forced. "You gonna open up?" he asked. "Or let me hang on this drainpipe all night?"

I expected a repeat of the night Yvonne dumped him, because I knew what had happened: Saronda's family was departing on the transport, and she'd chosen life offworld—where you can live for hundreds of years in peace and comfort—over a couple of decades with a boy from B9.

But I was wrong. Her father had purchased Artie's passage, as well, for Saronda's happiness and because he found Artie to be a man worth saving, a man with a contribution to make.

"Then this is good-bye," I said, my voice choked with my loss.

But Artie shook his head. "I'm not going," he said, as though he had never seriously considered it.

"What do you mean?" I demanded. "You *have* to go, Artie. You *have* to get out."

where you can live for
of years, you have to do it for us."

"And leave you guys here to have all the fun?" he asked, though his voice broke and his eyes swam with tears. "Naa."

"You *have* to!" I shouted again, and I struck his chest with my fist. "You *have* to, Artie! For all of us! You're the only B9er who's ever, ever been offered transport out of here, and you *have* to go! You have to go where you can live for hundreds of years, you have to do it for *us*. You have to live all those years for us, Artie—you're the only one who can."

Still he shook his head, though it took him a moment longer to speak this time. "Naa," he repeated. "Who'd make bikes for the kids? Who'd make them live by the Code? You saw what happened when I was gone for just a couple of months." He smiled at me, though he had to brush his eyes with the back of his hand. "Besides, I can't leave the Angels. DeRon would go mercenary inside of six weeks, and Stash is already smuggling on the side—I'm going to have to come down on him before he drags the whole operation lawless. And you know, there are bike packs in five other sectors now, and three of them follow the Code. I've got to stick around and make sure it stays that way."

"And Saronda?" I challenged, desperate for some way to talk him into going.

He drew a deep breath. "She thinks I'm already on board. Her dad won't tell her till they launch, he promised me." Then he looked out my window as a bright streak of light flashed across the darkened sky: the shuttle leaping upward to meet the waiting transport.

*"Damn you, Artie!"* I screamed at him, as though I were the one he had abandoned. *"Damn you, Artie, you should have gone with her!"* And I hit him again, and again, and again, until he grabbed my fists to make me stop and I dissolved in weeping. Then he held me close and we both wept until, exhausted, we finally slept in each other's arms; and our dreams echoed with the whisper of Saronda's anguished wails.

What a story it would be, if it ended there. You would understand, then, and perhaps believe, all the legends that surround Artie and his Angels. You would think that he devoted the rest of his life to protecting the children of B9, and eventually of other sectors, and that he restored pride and honor and—dare I say—chivalry to a society that had lost all that. That was his intention, certainly. But he never had the chance.

We had known for months there was a Reaper hanging with the Big Dogs, one who had escaped death on the day of their invasion. We knew because the Reapers' insidious philosophy began creeping out of A12. When the assault was made on the shuttle, though, we all supposed that was him, and the assailant's death put an end to the threat.

We were wrong.

It was six months later, and Artie was in his shop building a bicycle for a kid who had just come in from outside. I was in my room, just across the street, studying Taninger's treatise on folk myths. Although I was never accepted for advanced schooling, Artie had insisted that I keep studying remotely. With his help, I was working at the first-year university level in math and science, and higher in social studies. It had just occurred to me, reading Taninger, that the Arthurian cycle had many parallels to the Christ cycle, when I heard the double shotgun blasts.

I bolted for the door, not even pausing to look out my window. Though the sound was foreign to me, and I wouldn't know until much later what had made it, I was seized with a dread conviction that it had come from Artie's shop.

The Reaper hadn't stuck around, but his handiwork was all too evident. The fiberforced glass in the storefront window was not meant to withstand the onslaught of outlaw projectile weapons; it had shattered into a million harmless shards that crunched under my feet as I stumbled through the wreckage to the back of the room. Artie was on the floor between the truing stand and his frame-building jig, in a litter of primalloy tubing and joining patches. His chest was shredded where the brunt of one blast had caught him, and spots of blood glistened on his legs and arms from a spray of pellets.

Someone else entered behind me—Louis, it turned out. "Get a doctor!" I screamed. "Call for med-evac!"

But the light was already fading from Artie's eyes. "Wanted to take you with me," he slurred, blood foaming with the words from his lips.

"Don't talk," I commanded. "Lie still. Help is coming."

"Said I'd go if you could, too," he managed.

"Shut up, Artie!" I shouted. "Don't you lay that on me! Don't you do it!"

Then, impossibly, he smiled. "Morgan le Fay," he whispered. "Take me to Avalon …"

The story goes that we got him to a hospital, and the doctors were able to stabilize him enough to put him in a cryogenic chamber. That chamber went on the next transport ship to a distant world where Saronda was waiting, and where they have the medical science to heal him. Someday, when he's recovered, he'll come back to Earth again, to KanHab. In the meantime, Artie's Angels are still here, seeing that what he started doesn't die.

That's the story. But Artie died in my arms that night, and no med-evac bothered to come. Not to B9. Louis and I took him underground, to a place where a collapsed tunnel had left only a crawl space. We laid him in there and sealed it up, and we didn't tell anyone else. Then I concocted that story about the cryogenic chamber. Ha. As if KanHab had any such thing.

So that is the truth of what happened to Artie D'Angelo, but don't try to tell that to anyone in KanHab. He has become larger in death than he ever was in life—I have seen to that. A brutal act of nihilism deprived me of my friend, my pack leader, my guiding light, but I will not let it deprive KanHab of hope. The stories of Artie's exploits grow richer with each telling, and in them he succeeds, in ways he could only dream of, in protecting the helpless and improving the lives of those he left behind.

For us, he turned down a chance to live hundreds of years in comfort and peace with his beloved. I will give him, in its place, immortality.

Sleep well in Avalon, my Arthur. KanHab will not forget. ❧

# LAST TOUR OF DUTY

*If you take your luck where you find it, maybe when you need it, it will find you.*

"HERE'S ANOTHER LUCKY!" the private yelled as he pushed the stretcher out of the medical transport truck.

Corey knew the Lucky could wait, but he gave the boy a quick glance anyway. The soldier had an abdomen full of shrapnel, yet he was calm, like all Luckys were. After a year of receiving Luckys, Corey knew this one would make it, too.

"Put him over there by the other two," Corey said. "And get the rest of these boys into OR."

The private nodded. Corey supposed he should have demanded a crisp "yes, sir!" but the men needed all the energy they had just to get the dozen wounded soldiers across the dirt to the makeshift operating room.

At least it wasn't raining. Of course, when it wasn't raining in Nam, the air hatched wings.

Corey strode into the scrub tent. The other doctors were already washing: Jim, the new guy, who still walked in a daze even though he'd been here three months; and soft-spoken Lonnie. "Three Luckys." Corey elbowed on the faucet and held his hands under the running water.

"How about the rest?" Lonnie asked.

"Nine. Let's get to them as quickly as we can. Save the Luckys for last." They were [illegible] words, as worn out as their scrubs, but just as necessary.

"Let's get on it, gentlemen."

They got on it. Cockroaches scurried from sheets as bodies were placed onto tables. Corey cut, cleaned, extracted, sewed. One boy after another: missing limbs, shrapnel, and burns that were still smoking. Of the four boys that came across his table, maybe two would make it. No matter how fast Corey worked, no matter how brilliantly he patched and sutured, their odds for survival were never any better. Death ran too close a race.

The last boy he didn't bother to stitch. The medic had done a poor job stabilizing him. The wrap was too loose, and the soldier, Steve, by his grimy dog tags, had bled out his chance of survival on the ride over.

By Devon Monk
Illustration by John Picacio

LUCKY
STRIKE
GAMETTES

Corey shook his head and the nurse tugged the sheet over the soldier's still face before the orderlies were back with a new body.

This one was a Lucky. Corey took a moment to look at his dog tags.

"OK, Thomas, you're going to be just fine." Corey pushed his hands into new gloves, asked for the scissors, and cut the bandaging away from Thomas's stomach.

The medic who placed these wraps knew his shit. The bandages were tight, clean, even. Even an intern could tell the medic, Billy Templin—the wounded called him Lucky—had a knack for doctoring.

Ten out of ten wounded men Billy bandaged on the front lines survived. It was a weird probability that Corey had refused to believe for the first six months, but now, 18 months into his service here, any boy Lucky touched still didn't die.

Corey tended two Luckys and Lonnie took the other one. The new guy, Jim, left without saying a word as soon as he was done with his last patient. Corey figured he'd go off to drink, or try to sleep out the heat. One of these days, Jim was going to wake up and realize this wasn't a bad dream. Corey wasn't looking forward to that day.

"Any more?" Corey asked the private who stood near the door. The private shook his head. "That's all, Sir." What he didn't have to say, was: for now.

Corey took a deep breath, aware again of the sharp smell of sweat and rot of insides being exposed to the outside.

He shucked off his gloves and ran his hand over his face. Maybe half would survive his table. He'd do anything to increase those odds, and send more of the boys home breathing instead of in boxes.

Three of three Luckys would walk.

"How'd we do, Corey?" Lonnie asked as Corey stepped out into the fading sunlight.

The early evening air was hot and wet. Corey locked his jaw and strained the air through his teeth to get it down. Eighteen months had all but erased his memory of Colorado's clean, cold wind.

"The Luckys will make it," Corey said. "I think three or four others have a chance."

Lonnie nodded and pulled a rolled cigarette and lighter from his pocket.

"Too bad they all can't be Luckys," Corey said quietly. He heard the approach of incoming choppers over the forested ridge. Lonnie rubbed his thumb across his lighter. "Too bad Billy can't be here."

The ache lifted from Corey's shoulders. A breath of Colorado air, cool as a drink of water, suddenly brushed across the sweat on his face. Such a simple answer: Bring Billy here. The five-oh-four received wounded from several units. If Billy were here, he could help more boys, save more boys.

The chopper came closer. Lonnie finally got his joint lit and sucked a deep, satisfied lungful.

"Maybe Lucky should come here," Corey said, trying to keep the creep of excitement out of his voice. "We need a man like him."

Lonnie raised one eyebrow, but didn't exhale.

"We could send someone to bring him here," Corey said. "Hell, I'll go out there. Think of how many we could save." Most? he thought to himself. All? Could it be that easy? Statistics would say it was impossible, but then, so was the very real fact that every Lucky lived.

"They won't let him go." Lonnie's words came out like molasses, slow and smoky-sweet. "Always short on good men in the boonies."

"We're short on good men here!"

Lonnie blinked, the surprise and hurt plain on his face. He tipped his head and studied his bloody boots. "Damn, Corey."

Corey opened his mouth, closed it, and scrubbed his hand across his face. "I don't mean it that way. We just … we can't keep up with this." He waved his hand toward the OR tent. "We're losing, Lonnie. Can't you see that? Fifty-fifty odds. That's not good enough. Billy will make the difference. His boys don't die." Corey put his hand on Lonnie's shoulder. "We need him to work with us. So all the boys can go home."

Lonnie smiled real slow, like he had just tuned in a favorite song on the radio. "And then we go home, right?"

Corey nodded. "Sure. Maybe then we can all go home."

EVEN AN INTERN COULD TELL THE MEDIC, BILLY TEMPLIN—THE WOUNDED CALLED HIM LUCKY—HAD A KNACK FOR DOCTORING.

Before dawn, Corey packed his bag and walked out to the jeep like this was something he did every day. He swung into the driver's seat, and jumped when a low voice spoke.

"Be careful," Lonnie said. "It's pretty bad out there."

Lonnie stood in nothing but his boots, his red hair gone wild from sleep, or maybe from the active lack of it. He held a sheaf of papers out to him.

Corey took them.

"Paperwork to transfer personnel. These should work so long as the CO doesn't look too close."

Corey smiled. "Thanks. And go back to bed. You've got my rounds in an hour."

"What should I tell them when they notice you're gone?"

"I'll be back by then."

Lonnie shook his head, but he smiled. "Give 'em hell."

Corey turned the ignition and ground gears. He left Lonnie, the camp, the Luckys, and the dead behind, and followed the dirt track out along the edge of the ridge, then down through the press of hills.

This was too easy: stealing the jeep, Lonnie's papers, but he wasn't about to wait for someone to notice him.

The engine roared in the premorning air. Headlights traced gullies and bushes in stark relief. Dawn spilled out, and Corey gripped the wheel tighter, his hands sweating. Every bounce of the tires could trigger a buried claymore, every bend in the track reveal a sniper.

"Damn, damn, damn." He kept his foot down and his eyes on the brush. The platoon should be close, should be here. He couldn't have passed it, couldn't have gotten turned around in the darkness.

Heat rose off the jungle floor in biting, clicking swarms. Corey wiped sweat and pebble-hard bugs off his neck. One more mile. If the platoon didn't show, he would turn around. And try to explain this joyride to his CO.

A dirty mess of tents emerged from the woodline to his left. Corey slowed the jeep and waved at the sentry who called out a challenge. He let the soldier search his jeep, and showed him the papers Lonnie had rigged. The private pointed at the CO's tent. Corey took his time walking there, trying to keep his face poker-straight. By the time he had ducked into the tent and sat in the extra chair, he had his best bedside manners in place.

"Morning, doctor," Lieutenant Jonas said, his words slightly slurred. The tent smelled of stale whiskey and vomit. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Gunfire rattled, close enough to catch its own echo, and Corey glanced out the netting before answering.

"I have orders to take one of your medics back to the five-oh-four."

"Jesus," the lieutenant said. He took a swallow out of a nearly empty bottle. "Just one? Hell, they'll line up for you, Doc. Take 'em all back. And while you're at it, why don't you take the rest of the platoon?" He laughed, but his bloodshot gaze was steady and hard.

Corey forced a smile and handed Jonas the papers.

Jonas took the papers, but didn't look at them. "Which one of my boys do you want?"

"Billy Templin."

"Lucky?" Jonas's eyebrows shot up. He chuckled again, and coughed. "Looks like you've got a problem," he said. "Lucky Templin's dead."

Death had won again, outpaced him by what? Moments? Corey felt the weight of 18 months press his shoulders down into his spine.

"How did he die?" he asked.

"You've heard about the war, right?" Jonas drawled. "Tell you what. How about you scratch his name out of that order and write in some other bastard's name?"

"When did he die?" Corey asked. "This morning? Last night?" Gunfire popped again, farther away this time.

Jonas sniffed. "Seven months ago. About. During the rain. Jesus. You're seven months late."

"But—"

"Pulled his body in myself," Jonas said. "What was left of it."

Corey managed to nod. Jonas must be lying. Yesterday's wounded had Billy's signature wraps. They were surviving against the odds. Billy had to be alive.

"I'm sorry," Corey said. He took the papers, stood, and walked out of the tent, his mind spinning. He started the jeep and turned it back down the trail to the five-oh-four.

It didn't add up. The wounded were still coming in, still bandaged the same way they had been for the past eight months. Maybe Billy had trained someone else, another medic. Maybe he had gone AWOL. But if he had skipped out, why would he still be bandaging the wounded?

Corey was too wrapped in thought to notice the small bulge in the road ahead of him.

Something exploded. The world broke apart. The jeep swerved, tipped. Corey felt his head strike something hard where there should have been air and a detached voice in his mind catalogued each impact: skull fracture, broken ribs, collarbone, arm, and then there was a sickening crunch against his chest and the detached voice shut up while Corey screamed.

Darkness came in fits. Corey clung to it, tried to suck it down, but reality would not go away, would not stop hurting.

He watched a bird wing a tight circle against a sky gone white-hot and heard the crackle and lick of fire feeding on the wrecked jeep. The wind stirred, hot and wet, and tugged the edges of his clothes. Even though it was a minor pain, he shuddered in agony.

There was no one out here to look for him, the detached voice in his head came back to say. Too many breaks, probably a chunk of metal in the stomach. Bleeding too bad. Nobody to look for him. Nobody to hear his moans, and maybe he should try to be quiet anyway.

Die, take a breath, die again.

Cool hands touched his face.

Not until the hands probed his arms, torso, and legs did Corey decide they were real. He looked up.

A man leaned over him, gaze intent on his chest, fingers gently pulling the clothing away from the wound there.

Corey moaned.

"You'll be OK," the man said, his voice as cool as autumn in the Colorado countryside. He bent a bit to put himself fully in Corey's line of vision.

Corey blinked. Blinked again.

The man was horribly scarred, but his brown eyes were sparked with good humor, his crooked smile sincere.

Who? he thought.

"I'm Billy Templin," the man said.

Billy's hands moved with short, efficient motions: pulled out gauze pads and strips. His face seemed to fade until it was see-through, like a reflection on a dark window pane. Corey saw vegetation through his face; saw sky and a bird flying where Billy's forehead should be.

His hands were too cold, but they felt real.

Corey moaned as Billy slowly pressed and wrapped his wounds.

Still never make it, he thought. Too much blood loss, too much shock.

"You're a doctor, aren't you?" Billy asked as he splinted Corey's arm. "I always wanted to be a doctor. Didn't have the money for college." He shook his head. "But don't you worry. I've seen a lot of wounds. You're going to be OK. You haven't lost too much blood, and that chest wound is gonna clean up just fine."

*Too much blood loss,* he thought, and Billy smiled.

"I'm telling you, Doc, you haven't lost that much blood."

*You can hear me?*

"Sure. You can hear me too, right?"

*I'm hallucinating.*

"No."

*I'm already dead then.*

Billy chuckled and it was the sound of the wind in the elephant grass. "Not if I can help it."

*But you're d—.* Corey stopped mid-thought.

Billy's gaze became intense, his hands stilled. "I'm what, Doc?"

Jonas's words flashed through Corey's mind: "Lucky Templin is dead. Pulled his body in myself, what was left of it."

Billy seemed to hear that memory too. His face twisted with sorrow. He sat back on his heels. "Oh," he said, "oh."

Corey panicked. *Come back with me. You could be a doctor. You could save so many more at the five-oh-four. The wounded need you. I need you.*

"You'll be fine," Billy said, distantly, "they'll be fine."

*Not without your help,* Corey thought.

Billy smiled, and his gaze once again met Corey's. "You're the doctor. They need you."

*And you.*

"I'm dead."

*I can see you. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe Jonas is wrong.*

Billy shook his head, his smile crooked, sad.

*The men you touch live, Billy. You can't stop now.*

"Everybody dies sometime."

Corey wanted to ask him what he meant, but Billy stood and walked away, no more substantial than the wind.

The sound of shifting grass grew louder, a stealthy pace, footsteps.

"Holy shit," a voice cried out. "Over here."

Jungle boots came closer.

"Looks like a medic found him. Check the jeep and bush. Let's get this guy back to the platoon."

Corey tried to speak, but his mouth wouldn't work.

The soldier looked down at him. "You're going to be OK," he said. "Good thing our patrol came along. This is your lucky day."

Lonnie was surprised to see him on the truck with the other wounded. When he asked what happened, Corey only shook his head.

How could he explain it? Who would believe him?

The Luckys stopped coming. Corey knew he was the reason for it. He had convinced Billy of his own death. He had found him and killed him.

It took two months before Corey could operate again. When they brought the first wounded soldier across his table, Corey looked at his dog tags.

"You'll be fine, Grant," he said.

The boy's eyes, which had been wild with pain, seemed to focus, his expression become calm.

Corey knew that look. A brief, fresh breeze stirred the room. The constant ache in his chest suddenly eased.

While he cut and sutured, he thought he glimpsed someone walking between the operating tables, pausing to touch each wounded with a gentle hand, to hold loose bandages or tie gauze tighter.

Twelve out of the 13 wounded survived that day.

Corey did not speak of the phantom who walked among them, not even to Lonnie. The odds were finally on their side, and Corey knew how fleeting life, and luck, could be. ❧

By Eric T. Baker

# It's Bullet Time! *Max Payne* treats players to a virtual killing spree.

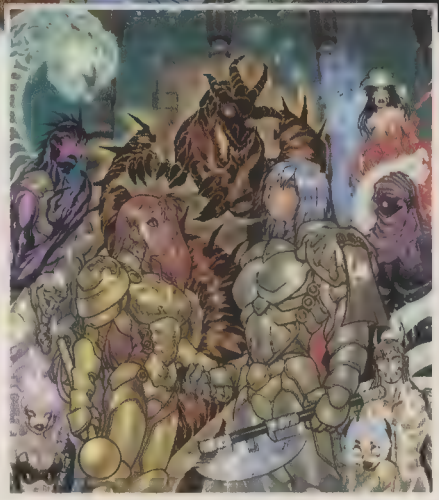
**Max Payne**, the new first-person-shooter computer game created by Remedy and produced by 3D Realms, is my kind of game. Modern day, modern guns, very little to do but kill things.

The reason the Max Payne chararcter is killing everyone is in the intro, which starts as a cut scene, but segues into an actual game sequence where the player acts out the circumstances of the death of Max's wife and infant child. Thus, before the game has really gotten started, the lead character's wife and kid are dead and there is nothing you, the player, can do to stop it happening. At first this appears to not only be cheating, but it also seems to be laying the melodrama on too thick. Later in the game, however, Max and the player revisit this event in two dream sequences, sequences that serve to remind the player why it is that they are piling up so many bodies. Taken together, I think these three sequences actually turn out to enhance the experience of the game, grim as they are.

Previous to starting *Max Payne*, I was playing *Heavy Metal 2* again, an FPS which is tricked out so that the player's character has the full range of Lara Croft moves: pulls herself up onto ledges, swings on ropes, climbs walls, etc. It was a big change to play *MP* because it is back to the FPS tradition of "If I can't jump on top of it, I can't get there." For the first couple of hours, I missed not being able to climb

Exalted, *the newest feature from White Wolf, mixes an epic feel with anime flair.*

fences and boxes. It would also have been nice if the *MP* engine allowed for leaning around corners as in the game *Thief*. By moving the point of view around, it is possible to see around corners in *MP*, but since the game is all creeping up on thugs and shooting them, it would have been nice to be able to put Max's body behind a wall and lean out with his gun and kill people that way.



The alternative to this is "Bullet Time," which rocks. In fact, the further players advance through the game, the better it gets. Bullet Time slows down the game while allowing players to aim in real time. It also lets them see the bullets in flight, both Max's and the thugs'. This is very handy because the AI on the thugs gets better as they also increase in hit points. At the beginning of the game, they will stand still and take only a single shotgun blast to kill. By the end, they are rolling everywhere and hiding behind everything, and they take three shotgun blasts to kill. With Bullet Time, players have a hope of putting enough rounds into the thugs quickly enough that they won't murder Max in return.

Sadly, the guns still cycle and reload in real time, so while players can get by using the sawed-off

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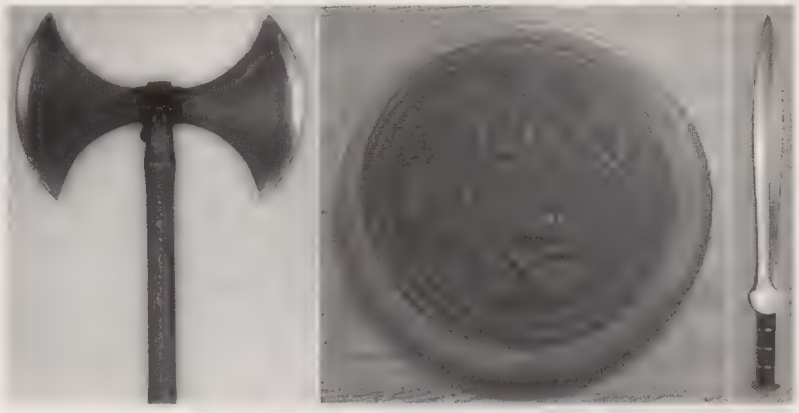
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shotgun at the beginning of the game, in the later levels it is necessary to use the M16 or Mac10s (or the Sledgehammer, a semiautomatic shotgun for which there is never enough ammo lying about) to kill the thugs in a single Bullet Time dive. Bullet Time is a finite resource. If the player turns it on while Max is moving, it turns off when he stops. This is to keep players from accidentally using all of it in one fight. More Bullet Time is earned by killing more thugs.

Three small annoyances: Max's feet are wider than they appear. He stops before he should, trying to fit between things. Despite the wide feet, Max has to be directly in front of and pressed against any of the switches in the game to activate them. In the case of doors, he has to press against them to open them, then back up so they can swing open. Finally, the thugs appear to be able to shoot through the corners of walls. Max can probably do this too, but since the player can't see the other guy to shoot him, trying it depends on how much ammo the player wants to waste. It is easier just to leap out into plain sight where the odds are even.

Players who dislike even odds can turn on Auto-aim. The results are hard to predict, but at some ranges, if Max is using the shotgun and if the player can get the crosshairs within 90 degrees of the thug, he takes the hit. And when you get in a good kill, the game gives you a short, slow-motion closeup the thug being knocked back or shot to pieces or whatever. It is pretty cool, and it happens less as the game goes on so that it isn't annoying even by the time the game is over.

Overall, I recommend *Max Payne*. There is only one bad level (a timed run through a flaming restaurant) and there are lots of good levels with many inventive and clever chances to kill thugs. The game is taking some heat in

the press for being too short, but it took me six days to complete. Maybe players who have dead-eye reflexes and only care about making kills, not making them artistically, can scoot through *MP* in no time, but where is the fun in any game if played that way? Besides, the game is all killing. Fun as that is, after two or three straight hours of murdering virtual people, anyone with sense should get up and walk around a while.

The newest game world from the people at White Wolf is *Exalted,* and its first release is a basic rule book of the same name. It is a high fantasy world with an unconventional setting. Among the works on its "Suggested Resources" list are Tanith Lee's *Night's Master,* Glen Cook's *The Black Company* novels, the Japanese anime *Ninja Scroll,* and SquareSoft's *Final Fantasy VII* videogame. Not surprisingly, if you've enjoyed all those works, then you will love *Exalted.*

Like Atlas Games' *Feng Shui, Exalted* is a high-powered game of over-the-top action. Players start not as first-level nebbishes, but as ass-kicking superheroes with weapons and powers far beyond those of normal humans. The characters start strong and get stronger, which is good because they are up against some truly powerful threats.

*Exalted* is set on a mythic world that used to be ruled by hereditary superheroes called the Exalted or the Solars. They came in five clans, each with its own four or five flavors. Below them were two other levels of superheroes (the Lunars and the Dragon Born), each with their own clans and flavors. The Solars ruled a vast empire and kept at bay the various creatures and beings of darkness including faeries, monsters, and lots of restless dead. Each of these classes of threats has their own lords, knights, and underlings. One memorable piece of fiction in the text does an excellent job of setting the tone for the game. It describes an attack on a city by a giant (it is described as being a league long), crawling corpse that vomits dead knights from its mouth.

The Solars ruled their empire until the day that one of their clans betrayed the others, rousing the Dragon Born to revolt against the Solars. All the Solars died during the revolt. The Lunars wandered off into the wilds where they mostly went native, mutating into wild, dangerous forces with similarly dangerous underlings. (In a different fiction piece, one Lunar is a giant half-wolf, half-goat whose spawn have built him a temple and are raiding villages.) With the Solars dead and the Lunars gone, the Dragon Born take over as the new rulers of the world. Things go pretty well until the Dragon Born's Empress vanishes, and suddenly the clans become less interested in maintaining the empire and more interested in civil war.

Meanwhile, the Solars are basically demigods (there are real gods that fuel everyone's supernatural powers), so they can't really be done away with. Their bodies can be killed,


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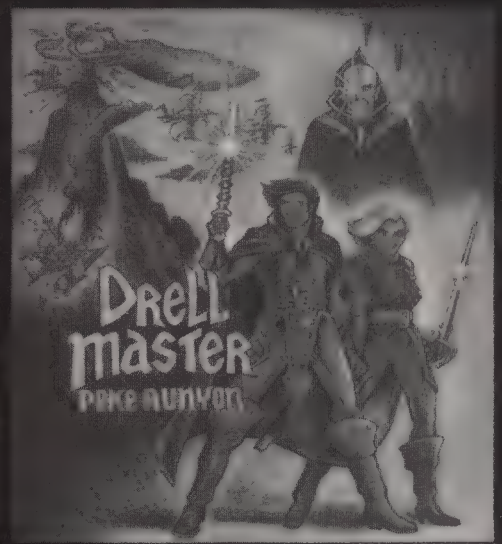


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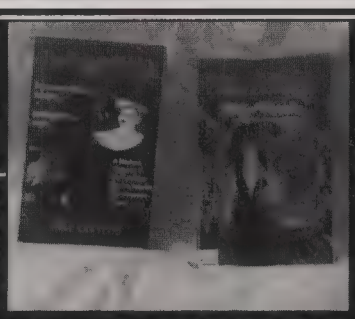

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but their spirits reincarnate. Before the Empress vanished, the Dragon Born handled this by killing the Solars before their powers manifested at young adulthood. Now that the Dragon Born are busy fighting each other, Solars are actually living long enough to learn to use their powers. This is where the players and their characters come in. The players create Exalted who are terribly powerful, but new to that power. These characters then fight against all the monsters, all the social ills, and even the forces of nature to protect the average, common people of the world.

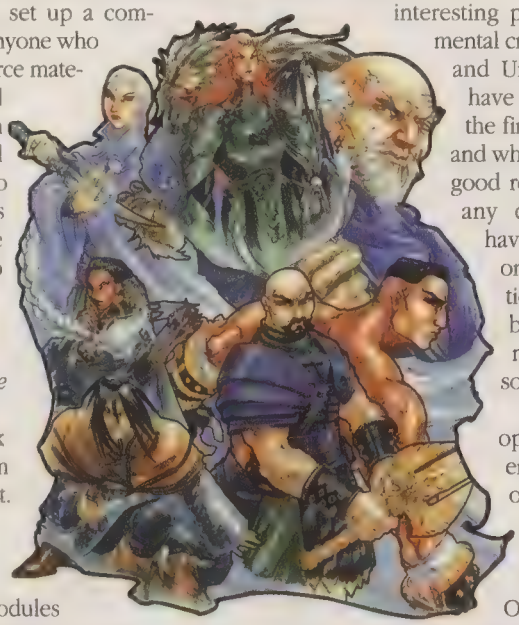
This is the best part of *Exalted.* Unlike White Wolf's *World of Darkness* games, players have a chance to be the heroes for a change. The characters aren't some stripe of undead creature, murdering humans and feeling bad about it. This time they're the actual good guys, and there are about a million wrongs for them to go stand against.

At the same time, what is bad about *Exalted* is just how much source material there is. While not as bad as the classic game, *Empire of the Petal Throne*, *Exalted* is 350 hardbound pages and half of those (including the 50 pages of antagonists) are background to the world. It is a lot of source material for a GM to keep straight. There are not just the histories, but every breed and clan of creature has its own powers and lore and weaknesses and so on. Compared to *Vampire* and its many source books, *Exalted* might seem easier to get into since all the information is currently only in one book. *Vampire*, however, is set in the familiar, modern-day world. The players will already know all the basics of the world (like how to catch a cab and what the names of the animals are) even if they don't know the names of more than three vampire clans. *Exalted* is a whole new world, and the players aren't going to know if there even are taxis, much less if there is something more dangerous than bears in the woods.

The answer to all this background is to start the campaign in a very simple place and give the characters very limited objectives. Many games force this model on the players. With *Exalted*, however, players could start anywhere doing anything. The 50 pages of Antagonists include some example Solars so the GM has some idea of how the world works, but the *Exalted* book does not contain an intro-

ductory scenario. To get the campaign going, the GM is on his own, unless he wants to wait for a scenario to be published separately.

Anyone who has ever played a White Wolf game can play *Exalted* because it uses a variation on the usual Story Teller mechanics. All the skills and powers are on paths and must be learned in order, but the hows of resolution are the same. The art and the fiction contained in the book set up a compelling world, and anyone who has enjoyed the source material will feel the call to play. How much fun everyone will have comes down to how much of this vast new world the GM can make real to the players.



The exact opposite of *Exalted* is *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil*, a new campaign book by Monte Cook from Wizards of the Coast. Wizards is doing a series of these campaigns, updating classic adventure modules from *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* early years. So far all of them have been very high quality and very entertaining, and *Return* is both those things.

The cover claims that *Return* is an adventure "taking characters from 4th to 14th level." While all the encounters detailed in the book will definitely take an average-sized party up all those levels, such a long series has to be called a campaign, not an adventure.

The scope of the book is far beyond the original module. As in the original, players start at the village of Hommlet. From there they journey to the temple of the first module, but this time, the clues they find establish that the elemental evil they fight at the temple is just the tip of the iceberg. The real threat is at a place called the Temple of All-Consumption, and it is huge. We're talking hundreds of thousands of experience points huge. We're talking a dungeon with 234 rooms huge. We're talking 15 pages of full-color maps huge. Trust me. This is not a campaign for an evening or a weekend. Starting a party on this quest is a commitment.

The good news is that the time spent saving the world in *Return* is time spent having fun. In each of the game's many dungeons, Cook has tried not to create just a collection of random monsters, but to give each place an actual ecology. Each of the monsters has a reason to be where it is, and that reason is not always just to make it hard on the characters to accomplish their goal. Often one sort of monster has come to the dungeon because it has been drawn by the lure of treasure or food or combat. Cook encourages the DM to not just read the room descriptions as written, but to think about how the characters actions will affect inhabitants of the dungeons and of the rest of the world.

There are tricks and traps and allies and enemies and cool phenomena. There are new crunchy bits (spells and artifacts and magic goodies), plus new monsters great and small. Monster-wise, though, the most interesting part is all the elemental creatures, like Xorns and Umber Hulks, who have been around since the first Monster Manual and who never had such a good reason for being in any dungeon as they have for being in this one. There is a particular satisfaction in beating a classic monster in a reasonable lair.

Thanks to the open gaming license, there are a lot of modules on the market now to get characters from first to fourth level. Once they've made it, then a DM only needs this campaign, and he is done until the characters reach the 14th level. If they make it, they will have not only saved the world, but they will have had a great time doing it.

The new *HackMaster Player's Handbook* from Kenzer and Company is another great big book, coming in at 400 pages of very small type and with many more tables than pictures. In total, it is over 350,000 words of rules, which is, frankly, part of the joke. *HackMaster* started in the hilarious comic strip *Knights of the Dinner Table* as the game played by the characters. The strip is a parody of *Dungeons & Dragons* players and *HackMaster* was a parody of *D&D* itself. Fans of the comic strip demanded that actual *HM* rules be published, but the people at Kenzer decided that doing so would have been basically republishing *D&D*, which was not only legally iffy, but also seemed like a waste of time.

That all changed with the coming of *D&D 3.0* because it allowed Kenzer to license the *D&D* rules from Wizards. Now they could publish their own versions of the *D&D* manuals, upgraded and expanded and rechristened *HackMaster*. Thus, the *HackMaster Player's Handbook* is huge because it contains most of the *D&D Players Handbook* plus lots and lots of new things for playing *D&D* the *HM* way, and it is huge because part of the joke about *D&D* has always been how big and thick the books are. To parody that, the *HM* books had to be silly big.

So what is all the new *HM* material? Ninety-seven new magic spells, 20 of which are dif-

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The question of playability doesn't really come into it in a book like this; playing the game isn't really the point. The weight of rules is crushing in *HM*, but again, that is part of the joke. *D&D* is often accused of having too many rules, so *HM* really does. The role-playing version of *Rune* placed the Game Master in serious competition with the players, and so does *HM*, but not seriously. The theme of players vs. the dungeon master is a recurring theme in gaming and in the *Knights of the Dinner Table* strip, and the *HackMaster Players Handbook* codifies it, giving advice to both sides on how to overcome the other.

Players who are fans of the *KotDT* comic strip will enjoy reading the *HackMaster Players Handbook*, as will *D&D* players who are willing to take their game a little less than seriously. As for actually playing it, that takes a group of people, all of whom fit in one or the other of those categories and who are willing to accept an evening of frequent character deaths and even more frequent arguments about rules as good-natured fun.

A "straight" d20 System supplement is *Legions of Hell*, a monster compendium written by Chris Pramas from Green Ronin Publishing. Pramas wrote the *AD&D Guide to Hell* for Wizards. This 64-page source book covers the denizens of the nine layers.

There are 45 hellions in the book, in alphabetical order with a chart in the back that ranks them by Combat Rating, from the Herlekin at 1 to the Iblis at 24. Each denizen has a full writeup including stats, attacks, location, and so on. Many have mounts and artifacts that get their own listing. Appendices in the back cover prestige classes, fallen celestials, and the angelic choirs. The great joy in fighting the creatures of hell is knowing that the characters really are fighting on the right side. *Legions* contains enough foot soldiers and generals to keep the players busy for a long campaign.

One of the many things that *HackMaster* gets right is that lots (not to say most) gamers have a dice fetish. Just out from Flying Buffalo Inc. are their Nuclear Misfunction Dice (also known as Nuclear Escalation Dice). One of them comes in the box with the *Nuclear Escalation* card game, but they can be purchased separately. The die is in full color. The "one" is a nuclear explosion, the "two" is a tiny picture of both Supergerm and Supervirus, and so on all the way up to the six little tombstones for the "six." Best of all, it glows in the dark.

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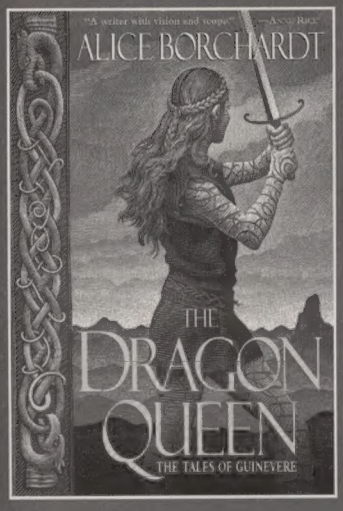


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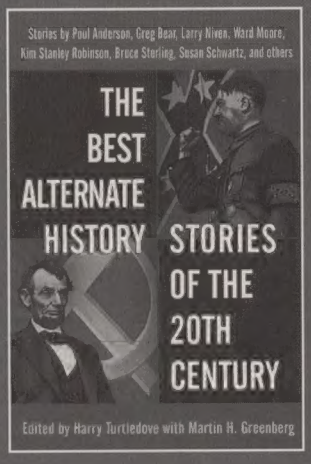
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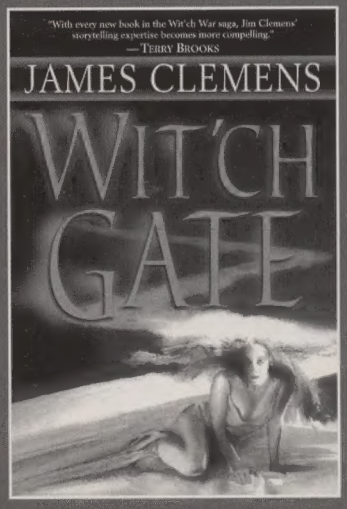
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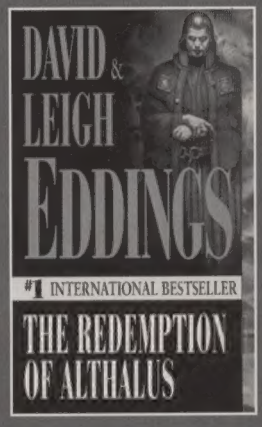


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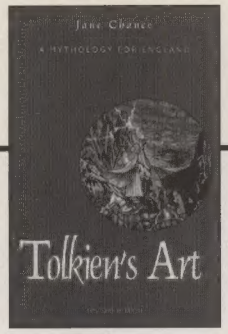


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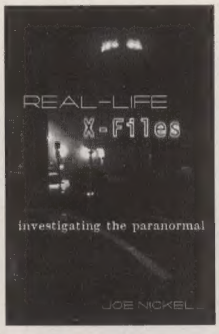


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**GENE WOLFE** was born in Brooklyn, New York. After moving around a great deal, he and his family finally settled in Houston, Texas. Gene began to write in 1956, shortly after he and Rosemary were married. They needed money for a bed and stove. His first sale was "The Dead Man" to *Sir* in 1965. Since then there have been numerous stories and books, including *The Fifth Head of Cerberus, Peace, The Shadow of the Torturer, The Urth of the New Sun, There Are Doors, Nightside the Long Sun, On Blue's Waters, In Green's Jungles,* and *Return to the Whorl.* His short stories have been collected in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories, Endangered Species,* and *Strange Travelers.* Nearly all of his books have appeared in the United Kingdom as well as the U.S., and most of his work has been translated. *The Shadow of the Torturer,* for example, has appeared in 12 languages. Gene has taught Clarion East and Clarion West and workshops for Florida Atlantic University. He also taught creative writing at Columbia College. His work has been given three World Fantasy Awards, two Nebula Awards, the British Fantasy Award, the British Science Fiction Award, and the Deathrealm Award, among others. Although it has never won a Hugo Award, his work has been nominated eight times. So far.

**M. SHAYNE BELL** has published short fiction in *Asimov's, Fantasy and Science Fiction, Interzone, Amazing Stories, Tomorrow, Science Fiction Age, Gothic.Net, SciFiction,* and *Realms of Fantasy,* plus numerous anthologies, including each of the three *Star Wars* short story anthologies. Bell is author of the novel, *Nicoji* (Baen Books, 1990), and editor of the anthology *Washed by a Wave of Wind: Science Fiction from the Corridor* (Signature Books: 1993), for which he received an AML award for editorial excellence. More recent novels continue to languish on the desks of editors in New York. Bell has published poetry in a number of venues, including *Asimov's, Amazing Stories,* and *Once Upon a Midnight.* He lives in Salt Lake City. His Web site address is: www.mshaynebell.com.

**DEVON MONK** lives in Salem, Oregon with her husband, two sons, and a colorful assortment of friends and family. This story is dedicated to her husband and marks her third appearance in *Realms of Fantasy.*

**RICHARD PARKS,** besides working on both novels and short stories, is currently assembling his first short fiction collection, tentatively titled *Borrowed Lives and Other Fairy Tales for Grownups.* Needless to say, *Realms of Fantasy* will be well-represented there.

**CATHERINE WELLS** has five SF novels to her credit, including *Beyond the Gates* (Roc Books, 1999) and *Mother Grimm* (Roc Books), a 1997 finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award. Catherine grew up in North Dakota and moved to Tucson, AZ, in 1982. She holds a bachelor of arts in Theater from Jamestown College (Jamestown, ND) and a masters in Library Science from the University of Arizona. She is a playwright as well as a novelist, with numerous productions to her credit. She and her husband are empty-nesters (yay! yay!) except for their aging Dalmation. Check out her home page at http://www.sff.net/people/catherine-wells. She loves to hear from fans!

**JANE FRANK,** along with her husband Howard, is a well-known and longtime art collector who in 1991 founded the art agency Worlds of Wonder when she discovered how few artists in the sci fi/fantasy genre were able to gain exposure for their art beyond the opportunities afforded by conventions devoted to the field. In addition to publishing numerous magazine articles and essays on artists and the art of collecting, she co-authored (with Howard) an art book documenting their 30+-year collecting habit, *The Frank Collection: A Showcase of the World's Fantastic Art* (Paper Tiger, 1999). Her most recent publication is *The Art of Richard Powers* (Paper Tiger 2001), which was the inspiration for her gallery feature article in this issue. You can visit Worlds of Wonder at http://www.wow-art.com.

**ERIC T. BAKER** was born in Reno, Nevada but has lived in Fairfax, Virginia since 1970. He holds a degree in English from Virginia Tech and was a graduate of Clarion in 1989. Eric sold his first story in 1992, but it was his third sale that appeared in print first. His work has appeared in *Amazing, Fantasy & Science Fiction,* and *Science Fiction Age.* He also has written two modules for BRTC's *Timelords* game system.

**GREGORY FROST** is a fantasy writer living near Philadephia. His fantasy novels, *Lyrec, Tain,* and *Remscela* (the latter two under the title *Crimson Spear*) have been reprinted in e-book and print-on-demand formats by Time/Warner's iPublish Division. He has been a university administrator, teacher, and television researcher. He is currently at work on a novel, *Fitcher's Brides,* for Tor Books. His most recent short work, "The Girlfriends of Dorian Gray," was published in the anthology *Dark Terrors 5.*

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